

Science Fantasy

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Editorial Kyril Bonfiglioli

Reading *SF Horizons* the other day I was intrigued by an apophthegm of Brian Aldiss': "The job of a critic consists of knowing when he is being bored, and why." An effective sentence and one which works very well in its context but I am sure that Mr Aldiss knows, better than most people, how incomplete a truth it contains, especially in the light of a quotation he makes on an earlier page from Simon O. Lesser's *Fiction and the Unconscious*. Mr Lesser, who is a disciple of that ponderously dirty-minded old Austrian gipsy fortune-teller, Sigmund Freud, says "Like some universally negotiable currency, the events of a well-told story may be converted effortlessly, immediately, and without discount into the coinage of each reader's emotional life". It is, as Mr Aldiss points out, a resonant sentence even though, as Mr Aldiss does *not* point out, its gravamen is negligible and its hyperbole shaky. What is interesting about it is the choice of the phrase "*well-told story*" where a more superficial writer would have said "well-written".

Nine times out of ten when a reviewer (as distinct from a critic) applies the phrase "well-written" to a piece of prose he means either that it exhibits bursts of purple mandarin-diction (forgive the chromatic discrepancy) or, more commonly, that he found it abundantly *readable*—in short that he was not bored. I am not here concerned with the former contingency, only with this concept of readability—as distinct from literary merit—and its application to the appraisal of science-fiction.

The front page of the *Daily Mirror* is usually full of eminently readable, well-told stories—one would have to be blasé indeed to be actively bored by it—but I am sure that even the editor would not claim that it is well-written, except in a purely technical and commercial sense. We Northcliffe method, resulting in typographical athletics, know how this is achieved—a logical extension of the avoidance of polysyllables, pre-digestion of facts, dissection of prose-units into breath-sized gobbets, ambiguous headings and all the other easily-learned journalistic tricks. We do not equate these simple techniques of applied psycho-

logy with literary merit any more than we confuse television "commercials" with entertainment.

Let us move up a notch. The enormous success of the late Ian Fleming's *James Bond* series might tempt one to describe them as "good" or "well-written" books. They are, of course, nothing of the kind. They describe with implicit approval the base actions of an amoral thug engaged in an unsavoury trade; they are implausible in content, undistinguished in style, palpably deleterious in their effect upon the young and clearly written within the terms of a cynically-devised formula intended to appeal to the most despicable elements in our characters. I read them avidly and so (statistically speaking) do you: cruelty, lechery, gluttony and snobbery are a group of indoor sports peculiar to what we laughingly call *homo sapiens*. We are not bored with these stories because, quite apart from the succulence of their content, they are supremely well-told and the style is perfectly fitted to the class of material and the kind of reader aimed at. This applies equally to the *Hank Janson* stories. We are not regaled with descriptions of the changing light on the hills or the iridescence of a bird's wing; we are given crisp details about things we can still take an interest in even when all our critical faculties are switched off: the soft leather shoulder-holster under the tropical-weight suit, the Morland cigarettes in the flat, gun-metal case, the black, knitted-silk tie, the erectile nature of nipples. This is all Lesser has to mean when he talks of effortless conversion of emotional currency: we can enter effortlessly into empathy with Bond because we do not have to wonder, when we are "being" him, whether we should be smoking Woodbines or Morlands. We can change our money easily: we have been told the rate of exchange. This is a technique which Defoe mastered and Richardson did not, which is why a thousand people read *Robinson Crusoe* for every one who has heard of *Pamela*.

But what happens to Mr Aldiss' definition? If Bond does not bore the critic then his occupation's gone; if *Paradise Lost* does, then his only task is to find the reason, which may lie deep in his own defective faculties . . . no, this definition can only be applicable if we postulate

an inhuman super-critic whose values are absolute, who sits shivering with glee over *Paradise Lost*, reads *Martin Chuzzlewit* with the merest occasional twinge of inattention, stifles yawns throughout *Goldfinger* and falls promptly asleep at the sight of a *News of the World* sex-murder headline. Believe me, there ain't no such animal—and some of my best friends are critics, as the sheriff of Delma might have said.

(To be continued, as they say, in our next. K.B.)

THE IMPOSSIBLE SMILE

by Jael Cracken

Concluded

The moon should have been the ideal place for the régime of the British Republics to thrive in: scenery and policy alike were arid and uncompromising. Only in the sense of having been rough-hewn by time did either of them approach beauty; they functioned by virtue of the accidents of the past. And lunar colony and police state alike required a continual maximum effort to maintain equilibrium.

Yet the régime did not thrive here; the intransigence of the one clashed with the intransigence of the other. Luna had always been a trouble spot. There seemed to be no room for any law but the harsh natural ones, and on these stony shores of space politics secured little foothold. With the death of Our Beloved Leader, revolt against the powers-that-be broke forth again. It was to quell this insurrection that Colonel H had arrived at the British sector.

He took immediate advantage of the chance which threw Wyvern into his power almost as he landed. For, if the lunar base—with Bert the Brain and its potentialities for military conquest—was the key to his future, Wyvern gave him the power to turn that key. Wyvern was a telepath. From Wyvern Bert should learn the ability to read the minds of the whole population; and when it could do that, H was firmly in the saddle.

"Take him down to Bu-X!" Colonel H ordered. "And be careful with him. Don't repeat the mistakes you made with Grisewood."

They took Wyvern away struggling.

"Right," the Colonel said to his secretary. "Now arrange with Radio Imbrium for me to televise to the people at fourteen hundred hours tomorrow in the role of Beloved Leader. I don't think we'd better fix it for any earlier than that."

He turned resolutely to the formidable mass of reports on his desk. They were without exception smudged and hard to read: the imported Turkish typewriters were unsatisfactory in every way. He made a note on a memo pad to enquire into the possibilities of setting up a typewriter factory when he got back to Norwich. Then he turned again to the papers, hunching his shoulders grimly. He was not cut out for paper work.

The secretary returned from the telephone, looking spruce and savage.

"It's taking them a while to get Wyvern down the passage," he reported. "I told them they must not lay him out or anything beastly like that. That's Bu-X's job."

"This ruddy administration—," Colonel H began. He was occasionally irked by what he considered his underling's prissy way of speech.

"I came back to say we'd forgotten something," said the secretary crisply. He disliked these outbursts against paper work, believing legislators to be the unacknowledged poets of the world. "I came to remind you that we had Wyvern in our hands in Norwich. We should have found out *then* that he was telepathic—that was what we handed him over to Parrodyce for. I understood that gentleman was supposed to be infallible?"

"My God!" H exclaimed, jumping up. "You're right! Why didn't I think of that?"

He snatched up his desk telephone.

"Send Parrodyce up to me on the double," he barked, and bruised the receiver setting it down again.

"Lucky I had the wit to bring that fellow to Luna with us," he said. "If I remember, you were rather against the idea."

The secretary stood dapper and silent, gazing at the crease in his trousers. He was an excellent judge of when silence was both wisest and most infuriating.

The four New Police who had been entrusted with Wyvern were getting him fairly rapidly down a stretch of passage when Parrodyce appeared at the other end of it. The Questioner looked disturbed. He was wasting no time in answering his boss's summons, but he quaked in doing

it. His cheeks shone, his spectacles misted. Then he saw Wyvern and Wyvern saw him.

Only a short while before, Wyvern had resolved never to make contact with a human mind again. His contact with Dorgen had sickened him to the core; it had indeed contaminated him, for he had involuntarily taken over the dying man's jumble of impressions complete, and they were now as much a part of him as his own memories. He wanted no more such. Least of all did he want ego-union with Parrodyce, for he already knew that here was a mind more sick than Dorgen's.

Nevertheless, the desperate circumstances altered the case. Too much was at stake for queasiness. He did not hesitate. Disregarding the posse who had bodily hold of him, he made mental contact with Parrodyce.

He held it only for a second. It was enough.

Their thought states interlocked.

Wyvern: 'They've discovered what I am. I slipped up. It's all over. I'm being taken to Bu-X, whatever that is.'

Parrodyce: 'Fear for myself. That explains what H and buddy want me for. My secret's up too—or if not that, they'll think I've failed. Either way: torture, pain. Pain! Remove my lower jaw maybe. Castration . . .!'

Wyvern: 'Stow it! Listen—my guards will be getting most of this exchange.'

Parrodyce: 'Then I *am* betrayed. It's your fault, Wyvern. Why didn't I kill you when I had you? We'll both be taken to Bu-X. That's where they fit you up to couple you on to Bert the Brain. They're worse torturers than I and Joe Rakister, my assistant. Daren't go to H.'

Wyvern: 'You must escape, Parfodyce, now. Get away to another sector quickly. Tell them what is about to happen; Bert must be wrecked. If this scheme of H's succeeds, he'll rule the entire roost in no time. A telepathic computer would be unstoppable. Get away now.'

Parrodyce: 'Must save own skin. Which sector is powerful enough to defy H, which?'

Wyvern: 'Try any—American will do. All sectors must unite against this. Bomb it to bits if necessary.'

Parrodyce: 'Killing. Good.'

Wyvern: 'Just get the message through. Leave them to judge. Now for heaven's sake scoot, you horror.'

Parrodyce: 'Loathe you. Yet if you were saved, you could probe me properly, find what went wrong. Some thorn in the infant flesh. Oh, Wyvern, am afraid . . .'

Wyvern: 'There'll be nothing to fear if you get out. And listen, somewhere on Luna is a girl called Eileen South; she's a telepath, no other details. Tell her—tell her I loved her.'

Parrodyce: 'No use for women. Subtle, smothering . . .'

Wyvern: 'Get the message through. Do it all, and I swear if there's ever a chance I'll dig down through your dirt and put you right, if it's still possible.'

Parrodyce: 'Love/hate. Going now.'

The contact broke. The plump figure at the end of the corridor turned and ran back through the door it had entered. Badly frightened, one of the guards, strictly against orders, slammed home a blow on to the side of Wyvern's chin.

Oblivion was a complexity of sensation. The top of Wyvern's sleeping mind whirled, whirled till all its colours blended into blinding whiteness. He was far away, but his heart still beat, his bloodstream still flowed, his latent consciousness foamed and subsided like milk boiling on an intermittent fire. Down there, where sleep never penetrates, fright was active; the smouldering intelligence knew that something was afoot which would violate its inmost hearth. The something came from outside, where all dangers came from, but it was working steadily in, insidiously, slyly and/or boldly, deeper.

The danger was chromium-plated, then it was a gnarled hand, or it was pins. It had little piggy leech-snouts, or it had nozzles or nails. It assumed any shape to get where it wanted, and soon the primeval country fell to this protean invader, and the enemy camp fires glowed from every point of vantage.

Time slowed, stopped. Presently it began again at a new rhythm. Dawn came: Wyvern roused.

He could not move. He was looking at a wall of lawn

starred with daisies, or it was a green sky stuffed with stars; slowly, with infinite care, the invalid muscles of his eyes brought it into focus, and it was a green wall of instruments, studded with little dials, like eyeballs. It was about three feet away from him. He acquired these facts as a new-born babe might acquire them.

Something fiendish had been done to him.

Men in white overalls crossed his line of vision. For the most part, they seemed to ignore him, being more concerned with the little dials. Then one came over and injected something into him—it might have been into his shoulder or his calf, he could not tell, could only feel a coolness spread, gradually defining the limits of his body.

It seemed to him he was left alone then, with only the blind eyeballs to watch him. Slowly strength returned. Wyvern discovered that he was lying on his chest with a pillow under his left cheek. Taking his time about it, he rolled on to one side and sat up, propping himself up with his arms helped by the light lunar gravity. The effort dizzied him; he sat with his eyes shut, vaguely exploring the dry taste in his mouth. He could eventually open his eyes again.

He was in a small room on a large table. He had been covered with a blanket which had now slipped aside. He was naked; he could see his body direct, and in a wide mirror slanting above the table. Wyvern stared at the reflection—not in horror, for his subconscious had already accepted this violation.

From six points on the front of his body, and two on his legs, little terminals projected. From the terminals, cables—or were they tubes?—led off. He could tell that his back was similarly served.

His skull was shaved; from it, similar though smaller terminals projected, secured into the bone. There were twelve terminals in his skull, and the connections from them had been built out so that the rear of his head was surrounded by a kind of wire basket, like a fencing mask worn backwards. A pigtail of cable hung from the back of the basket, carrying the wires away.

"Someone's been busy," Wyvern muttered to himself. Only that trivial thought bubbled up.

At the bottom of the bed, a steel arm with a hook on it gathered all the thin cables together into one fat one. The fat cable slithered across the floor to a trolley fitted with valves and glass cylinders and a pump which worked slowly and laboriously. At the other side of the trolley, the cable ran into the base of the green instrument panel.

Wyvern had no doubt at all as to what it all meant. Experimentally, he tugged at the terminal set in his left nipple and felt the network of wires like capillary veins tighten under his skin. They had taped him up. The innermost meaning of his innermost chromosome was being syphoned out of him and on to the panel. He could feel his slightest sensation, an itch on the pores of his leg or the stir of bile in his gut, register in micro-amps and flick up a reading on a dial. He could feel his thoughts scuttle along the wires and whistle through the machine's mazes. He was ready to be coupled up to Big Bert.

Sighing, he lay down again. A small metal box was fixed between his shoulders—a fuse box? He wondered—and he could not lie comfortably. So he lay uncomfortably.

Four men entered the room. They wore white overalls. Two of them took great interest in Wyvern, examining him, prodding him, checking the instruments; the other two stood to one side rather boredly, and began chatting together. Wyvern could hear snatches of their conversation.

“ . . . nasty bust up on Twenty One last night. Three of our boys had it.”

“My mate Alfred was down there. Apparently he picked up with some French tart . . .”

It was a reminder of a world which might have ceased to exist for Wyvern.

The examination took the best part of an hour. At the end of it, the examiners showed themselves satisfied and left. They returned in ten minutes with Colonel H's secretary.

The secretary came over to the table and stared down at Wyvern. Viewed from this angle, he looked less the pukka officer than usual, more the thug; his mouth had that stupid set to it observable in men of callous natures.

"You see we managed to bring you through," he said, mock-brightly. "How are you feeling?"

"I want a drink," Wyvern said. But, he reflected as he asked, he did no longer need a drink; the trolley had automatically supplied the shortage. The secretary, in any case, paid no heed to the request.

"I regret the Colonel could not come," he said. "He is attending to a little source of irritation outside. We are going to get the computer to work draining you straight away—it has already been given its instructions. Results should be coming through by late afternoon, shortly after the Colonel is officially proclaimed Beloved Leader."

"I'm not interested," Wyvern said sourly.

"You should be—it concerns you," the secretary said. He turned and talked in a low voice to the men in white. After some consultation, one of them left the room; he was gone only a minute, and when he returned he said, "Yes, they're all standing by at Computer Central."

"Splendid," the secretary said. "You'd better switch on straight away."

The other nodded and went over to the green panel.

Wyvern tensed himself, not knowing what to expect, unless it was a form of electrocution. He lay there on the devilish rack, eyes probing the others. Apart from some signs of strain, their faces were blank. Of all the winds loose from Pandora's box, Wyvern thought, only the wind of science blows today; untempered by human kindness, it's a cold wind. I die of mere cleverness.

But several toggle switches clicked over and he did not die. Indeed, at first he felt nothing. Then a not unpleasant vibration crept through his body. It worked steadily through him, learning every cell, and so into his brain.

An indescribable sensation of a myriad doors being flung open attacked Wyvern. But for that moment he was not Wyvern; his identity was gone, sucked into the giant computer for inspection. Then it was back, packed into the correct cubicles it had come from. Then silence.

The white-overalled men glanced anxiously up at H's secretary, then turned back to the board. Without a word, they commenced checking across the wide expanse of instruments.

"What's up?" asked the secretary sharply.

"Power's packed in," one of the men said in an equally sharp tone.

The secretary strode over to the board.

"You mean to say—," he began.

"Everything's perfectly in order *here*," the other interrupted. "Our readings are all O.K. It's the pipe to Bert where the failure's occurred. You'd better get them on the blower—maybe the rioters have cut the line!"

"Get them yourself, as quickly as possible," the secretary ordered. As he spoke, the phone gonged. He grabbed it and listened, barking every now and again.

"Damned incompetence," he remarked, putting the receiver down as if he were lowering an enemy into a cobra's hole. "That was Computer Central. They say that Bert itself has shut down. They are at a loss to account for it, but are working on the problem. No faults detected as yet. I'm going over there. See that this fellow Wyvern does not die."

He left.

The white coats promptly lit cigarettes. They looked quizzically at Wyvern, then gave him one.

"Thanks," Wyvern said.

"Think nothing of it. Smoke while you can."

"I mean thanks for realising I was still human."

"Oh that." They laughed uneasily, and lapsed into silence.

Wyvern was not letting them off so lightly. Confidence had returned to him. For one thing, it was clear that the machine was not going to kill him: it had to learn from him, and therefore there was the possibility that he could enlist it on his side. For another thing, the knowledge that had been, so to speak, drawn from him and put back now showed itself to contain an item he had overlooked. For another, nobody had a thing on him legally, and when Bert had finished its task Wyvern should again be a free man—provided he could engineer himself free of the Colonel's house party.

"Answer a straight question, will you," he said to the technicians. "Just what do you think I've done that

squares your consciences with this inhuman job you are carrying out on me?"

They exchanged looks.

"Do you think we don't know about you?" one asked. "The whole Sector knows about you!"

"Knows *what* about me?" Wyvern said.

For answer, the other fished a copy of "Lunareview" from his pocket. It was the latest edition. It bore Wyvern's photograph and headlines which ran:

MURDER BY EX-CRUXTISTICIAN DUMB MAN DIES IN BRAWL OVER BLONDE

VI

Now Wyvern was alone in the room except for a guard. The guard called himself a male nurse; his name was William. He was very big and pale, and had been born on the moon; his father was dead, his mother worked in the Imbrium Dyes Factory and he had three sisters, Katie, Joyce and Joy, all of whom were married except Joy, and she was engaged.

This Wyvern had learnt when William first arrived. Now the big fellow settled down in a chair beside the couch and absorbed himself in part three of a four part serial entitled "Shall Love's Affairs Be Hushed?" contained in a magazine Joy had lent him.

Wyvern lay back, glad of a chance to collect his wits. So much had happened, he found himself marvelling he was still whole and hopeful. Part of the hope lay in the fact that he realised he knew the identity of Dorgen's murderer.

During the disorienting periods of ego-union he had spent with Parrodyce and Dorgen, many impressions had soaked in on him. He had scarcely heeded them at the time, and had shrunk from trying to sort them later, so unprepossessing had most of them been. Yet hidden information lay in them; he might, for instance, have discovered in them the severing of Dorgen's tongue, had he attempted the analysis.

An analysis was precisely what Big Bert had performed in the few moments before its mysterious breakdown. It had coupled like with like, and this orderly process inevitably left an imprint on Wyvern's mind; indeed it might almost be said to have altered the whole organisation of his mind. It left two hitherto separate facts significantly side by side: Dorgen's mental picture of his killer; Parrodyce's mental picture of his assistant. The pictures dissolved and merged; they were one: Parrodyce's assistant was Dorgen's killer.

Why? Wyvern asked himself *Why?* How? But the truth had lain there undeniably in his mind waiting to be developed, like a film in a dark drawer. He was able even to piece together a name with the portraits: Joe Rakister; for though the name had never actually been formulated to him in the state of ego-union, face and name were one symbol.

If only Wyvern could get that knowledge through to a neutral authority, he would be cleared of the spurious charge H had framed him with. That meant getting himself clear of the Sector. Of a sudden, he longed for a free, straightforward life again. He was not dead yet: and better be dead than waiting here for he knew not what.

He slid his legs off the table.

"Here, you've got to stay on there," William said, looking up from his magazine.

"I've got cramp in my legs. Let me try and have a walk round."

"That machine's supposed to look after your cramp."

"My dear William, science has not yet invented an antidote to pins and needles. You get on with your reading; I can't go far."

William grunted uncertainly and returned to the love story. Wyvern found his legs were a good deal stronger than he had expected; the trolley had indeed looked after him well. He walked slowly towards it, feigning weakness and groaning, dragging the cable with him. When he was up to the trolley, he called out.

"I think I'm going to faint, William!"

The big guard was on his feet at once. Wyvern bent double, grabbed the cable, and wrenched its multi-point

plug out of its socket on the trolley base. Thus armed, he swung about, whirling the cable over his head. The heavy plug caught William hard behind one ear. He went down on his knees, crashing into the trolley. Wyvern snatched up a urine bottle and crowned him with it.

For a moment Wyvern paused to wonder if he was going to survive being disconnected. Although his blood pounded heavily, he felt well enough, despite the overhead mirror's assurance that he looked horrible. He went rapidly to work.

He slipped William's white overall and slacks off and assumed them himself. He peeled the man's shirt off and tied his hands behind his back with it. He stuffed the woman's magazine into his mouth. There was adhesive plaster in a roll on the trolley; with this Wyvern stuck the magazine in place and wound a couple of twists round wrists and ankles.

The result was not artistic but it would hold for a bit.

Bundling the loose cable, which was still attached to the terminals on his body, into a pocket, Wyvern made into the corridor. There was no light or sound anywhere. He could vaguely discern two doors in the corridor, one at each end. He went to one, hesitated, opened it.

It was a hospital-type wash room and lavatory, without windows. 'This is probably a mile below surface,' he thought, heart sinking. The only outlets, apart from the flush, were a small ventilator grill and a large refuse disposal chute. He opened the latter; it evidently did not function properly, being choked with rubbish: bloody bandages, newspaper, cigarette cartons. A grey human finger caught his eye. Good old Grisewood, he thought grimly; or was it Grimshaw?

He went back down the corridor, glancing in at the recumbent William, and tried the far door.

Stairs went up on his left, another door stood just ahead. He took the stairs, ascending easily in the low gravity.

A light burnt at the top. This looked like part of a regular hospital. Someone was talking somewhere.

A row of closed doors faced him, all identical and uninviting. One of them said "Private". Wyvern could feel

panic beginning to mount in himself; the business of taking pot-luck at closed doors quickly becomes wearing in such sinister establishments.

At least he would have the element of surprise on his side, and this might be considerable in view of the contraption on the back of his skull. He barged into the door marked "Private", determined to bear down anyone inside.

Nobody was there. It was an office. Neat white furniture. Synthetic flowers on the table.

Quite an anti-climax, he thought. There was a far door. Wyvern opened it casually, expecting a cupboard.

An old lady dropped a cup of tea and began to scream. Perhaps she was the almoner, he thought later. In a moment he had his hand clapped over her mouth.

"I'll throttle you if I hear another peep," he lied. Now what do I do? he asked himself; I should have brought that damned adhesive tape along from below.

"Got any adhesive tape?" he demanded.

She rolled her eyes and made signs. He brought his hand an inch away from her mouth and said, "What was that?"

"I only asked if you had *cut* yourself," she said timidly.

"Never mind that! Where is the tape?"

"Just next door. It's a store, a medical cupboard, don't you know. You'll find some in there."

Wyvern didn't want to risk going into the corridor again.

"How do I get out of here?" he asked.

"To where?"

"To anywhere!"

"Well if you turn right and go down the corridor, you get into the male nurses' quarters——"

"And left?" he prompted.

"There's a side entrance down that way."

"Which door?"

"The last—no, the last but one on the right."

"Thanks," he said. "Now let's go and get that tape."

He hustled her through the outer room, paused to peer round the door, took a firmer grip round her mouth,

pulled her out into the corridor and opened the door of what she had described as a cupboard.

It was a staff room, with three women in it. The old lady was no fool, Wyvern thought, cursing her quick-wittedness.

He pushed her into the room, slammed the door and ran like mad down the corridor, hoping furiously she had at least not lied about the staff entrance.

She had. This was a dingy waiting room. Again no windows.

He tried the next door. The corridor echoed with shouting behind him, and he burst out of it with his only weapon, the cable, swinging in his hand.

He was in a dark side hall. It contained a staircase and two other doors, one with frosted glass, through which he could see the blur of an approaching figure. He could hear someone also approaching the second door, steel-shod boots ringing on tile. And two pairs of legs appeared at the head of the stairs and began to descend even as he paused.

It was too late to double back into the corridor, where the women were no doubt marshalling male help. Wyvern was cornered!

At the last possible moment, he spotted a cupboard door under the stairs and dived into it. As he did so, he recognised the voice of one of the men coming down the stairs; it was Colonel H, and in a foul temper by the sound of it.

Mops and brooms filled Wyvern's perilous hiding place. He stumbled against them, but the clatter went unheard, for by this time the pursuers had gained the side hall and run into the two men entering by the other doors. The women from the staff room were all trying frantically to explain at once, the men were trying to calm them.

The high voices were silenced by H's bull-like roar. His anger scattered them like pollen on a wind, and in no time they had all dispersed; a siren wailed distantly, insistently indicating that an organised search had now started.

Colonel H came down into the now empty hall with his

companion. Through the thin partition, Wyvern could hear every word he said.

"You see what happens," he was saying. "Nobody can be relied on. I tell you the whole set-up must be reorganised from top to bottom. Once I'm Leader——"

"But we haven't time," replied the other voice. It was H's secretary, his tones full of spinsterish annoyance.

"After this crisis, yes, by all means. But we can't change horses in midstream."

"You argue too much," H bellowed. "I'll ask when I want your advice in future. It's done me no good so far. Now we've lost Wyvern——"

"No," said the secretary, "We haven't lost him. He must be in the building."

"He'd better be!"

"Personally I rather admire Wyvern; he is what a century ago, would have been called a good all-rounder. But we have allowed ourselves to be diverted from our original topic," said the secretary icily, "which was the question of the disposal of Parrodyce and his assistant, Rakister."

"How can we dispose of them when we can't lay our hands on either of them?"

"That is a question merely of time."

"Time, time!" shouted the Colonel. "Too many of the underground—these so-called wretched Democracies—have seeped into the military for it to be merely a question of time! There's got to be a reorganisation. There's got to be a purge. Bull had to have one when he came to power." Abruptly, he controlled himself and said in a lower voice, "Give orders that they are both to be shot on sight. Parrodyce is a traitor."

"Rakister is not," the secretary said.

"Then why didn't he report back to us when he'd done the job? I told you long ago, never trust a man who prefers a knife to a gun—they're always neurotics. Anyhow, he knows too much about Dorgen. He must go."

Their conversation grew indistinct. They had moved off into the corridor. Wyvern heard the door click behind them. He could not stay where he was: doubtless the

building was now being combed. One obvious avenue of hope lay open to him.

He came out of the cupboard and ran up the stairs which H and his secretary had just descended. As he reached the first landing, he heard a door open on the level he had left. Double doors stood on the landing; he tried them, and they were locked. Softly, he hurried up another flight.

The stairs ended here in a single door. It was of clear glass, and also locked. The whole building below Wyvern was housed beneath the lunar rock, for gazing out he could see he had just reached ground level. In a tiny square, a helicopter waited. This, no doubt, was the VIP entrance to the hospital.

Urgently, he pushed at the door. It did not budge. The glass was dauntingly thick. He was praying in the cavern of his dry mouth. Now footsteps were ascending the stairs behind him, rapidly, confidently.

If he could not get out of here, he was trapped in a dead end. Abandoning any idea of secrecy, Wyvern struck at the glass with his cable and point. It starred, but did not shatter. He was still battering when a voice behind him said, "You'd need dynamite to make a go of it, Wyvern."

He turned to stare into the muzzle of the secretary's revolver.

A long, tasty silence. Wyvern dropped his cable.

"I suddenly had this thought, you see," the secretary explained. "I left the Colonel to do all the shouting and doubled back on our tracks. It occurred to me that you might somehow have sneaked past us. Come on down."

"Listen," Wyvern said. "I don't even know your name, but you're not cut out for this sort of stunt. The régime's doomed anyway, so why not help me out of this? You should have enough intelligence to recognise a moral stink when you smell one."

"A puzzling and illogical appeal," commented the secretary, "with a lot of rich ingredients: an argument of necessity, a moral argument, something which sounded suspiciously like an appeal to the old school tie, and a yen to be formally introduced to me. My name's Bottom, if

you must know ; for obvious reasons I use it as little as possible. Now we must get you back on your couch."

"H would shoot you as soon as look at you!" Wyvern exclaimed.

"Won't wash, old boy—too obvious a ruse, and a lie anyway. Oh, granted he's a bit boorish. But stick by him and he'll stick by you ; I don't pretend to understand that type of idealism, but there it is. Now come on down."

"Look here——"

"Come on down before I shoot your foot off. Don't you believe me when I ask you nicely?"

There was no alternative. Wyvern started slowly forward. Then he stopped, shaken by a vast strangeness. Almost at once—it seemed intuitively—he knew what was happening: Bert the Brain had come back into action.

The secretary fired deliberately at his captive's legs. But it was too late. Wyvern's figure grew blurred, shadowy, and then disappeared.

The ricocheting bullet spanged dismally down the stairwell.

VII

From the orange-tinted windows of the "Single Z" bar there was a fine view of one of the Sector's airlocks, Trafalgar Gate. For the price of a drink, anyone with nothing better to do could sit all day and watch the traffic in and out of the big dome. Eugene Parrodyce sat and watched it now, from a concealed seat, wistfully.

A deal of military activity was taking place. There had been a demonstration here the evening before, and a home-made bomb thrown. Now a light tank stood by the gate, with new and military police reinforcing the usual lunar guard.

The sectionalised glass of the dome began fifteen feet from the ground, and rested on reinforced steel. The entire gate consisted of three pairs of double doors, two of them wide and the full fifteen feet high for freight, and one much smaller for personnel. There was also a guard

room which contained a door into the outside wall of the dome.

Behind all these doors stretched a vast, compartmented hangar containing decontamination rooms, showers, first aid posts, an isolation ward, a fire station and a repair base, besides the runways which terminated at the double airlocks leading to the lunar surface. A large team of men worked in this complex hangar, so that a stream of people moved in and out of Trafalgar Gate whether or not space-ships happened to be on the landing ramps outside.

Parrodyce knew that besides the actual airlocks at the far end of the hangar, there were also emergency locks in the sides. The knowledge was of no use to him. He did not know whereabouts they were; he had no spacesuit; he could not get into the hangar without at least four special passes. And to cap it all, he was tied to his seat with funk and indecision.

In his heart, he blamed it all on Wyvern. It was Wyvern's fault. Now he, Parrodyce, was a hopeless fugitive. The only element of comfort in the matter was that nobody was likely to betray him to the detested police if they recognised him; and the police seemed to have more urgent matters afoot. He thought longingly of his snug little questioning chamber below Norwich barracks, and of the timid friendship he had felt for his assistant until that amiable giant had disappeared.

And now the agent of his misery, Conrad Wyvern, was probably connected to Big Bert. For a moment, Parrodyce wished he might also be so connected. He visualised yearningly a vast father-mother figure who would take him over completely, know all his secrets. Then, recalling the pain this process would involve, he let his attention wander again to the window.

A Turkish six-piece band was haggling with the guard at the Trafalgar Gate. It had come to the British Sector as a seven-piece band; but the zither (doubling guitar) man had been disqualified from anything bar harp music the night before in a political brawl. As a protest, the rest of the band was leaving the sector. Besides a van load of possessions, they were taking with them their wives and their instruments. The noise from these two latter was

considerable, supplying a chorus of support for Fezzi Forta, the band-leader, who was haranguing the guard commander.

It appeared that the Customs wished to look into the dead musician's coffin, which was leaving with the rest of the band. The Customs seemed to think it likely that the ornate box contained contraband rather than a defunct Turk. Parrodyce was inclined to agree with them.

He was getting a pale sort of pleasure out of watching this tableau when a "Single Z" waiter arrived by his side.

"Gen'leman upstairs wants to see you," he told Parrodyce.

The liquid in Parrodyce's bladder froze over instantly.

"What's his name?" he asked. "What's he want?"

"He di'n' say, sir," the waiter said, adding virtuously "and I naturally di'n' ask. But he did say it was a matter of life and death you went up."

Parrodyce had an aversion to the word "death", but he got to his feet almost with a feeling of relief: the initiative was at last out of his hands.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"Right up the stairs. Room 3."

Parrodyce went up. There seemed no alternative, but in any case he was curious; if the New Police wanted to arrest him, why not do it in their usual fashion—in full view of others, as a warning—rather than in this round-about way? And if it wasn't the police, it might conceivably be someone offering him help.

Upstairs, cheap moon-plaster was crumbling from the walls. It was gloomy here, with a smell of beer and fag-ends and dirty trousers. The door of Room 3 stood open. Parrodyce entered cautiously, and was immediately grabbed. Arms, ferociously strong, flung him on to a bed.

He was searched all over, and then his captor stood back and surveyed him.

It was Joe Rakister, Parrodyce's ex-assistant.

"I never thought you'd be fool enough to walk in like that!" Rakister exclaimed. "You know I was up here—what made you come? Or have you got someone else with you? In that case, it's just too bad, because we're leaving in a moment by a back entrance."

This made little sense to Parrodyce. He stared blankly at his late assistant. The man looked wild. He was filthy and unshaven and evidently had not slept for some time. He wore some kind of ill-fitting uniform which included a cap, jammed tightly on to his head.

"You see, I'm too smart for you all," Rakister explained. "I cottoned on instantly. I messed up the killing of Dorgen—I heard someone come into the earth shop as I was doing it. And I thought, 'The Colonel will get you for this, boy!' And then I realised that he was planning to get me any way. I'd go back for my reward and nobody would ever see me again. For some reason, it was important to him to get Dorgen out of the way secretly; but the secret would only be really safe with me out of the way too. Oh, I worked it all out, Parrodyce."

"Very clever of you, Joe," said Parrodyce. "Go on."

"I've seen the telecasts. I know they pinned the job on this bod Wyvern. But that's just a blind to lull me into a sense of security and make me come out of hiding. It won't wash. Now they've sent you along—to talk me into coming back, I suppose?"

So he did not know that Parrodyce was also on the run—but how could he? The sense of hope rose in Parrodyce again.

"Well . . ." he said.

"Oh, don't trouble to deny it. I've got no grudge against you, Parrodyce—you were a good boss, as bosses go. But now you're here, you're going to help me. With your assistance, I can carry out a little plan I've hatched. We're going out through Trafalgar Gate, see? I'm beating it out of the sector."

The sense of hope swelled into a sense of triumph. It interfered with Parrodyce's breathing.

"Once we're in the open, you can please yourself what you do," Rakister continued. "I shan't harm you if you co-operate. If you *don't* co-operate, I'll kill you soon as look at you. Get that?"

"You know I'm no fool, Joe."

Rakister laughed harshly.

"See this get-up I'm wearing?" he said. "Never mind

how I came by it. It belonged to a lung-piper. Know what a lung-piper is?"

The term meant nothing to Parrodyce.

"A lung-piper is a chap who inspects the oxygen wells. You know how they get the liquid oxygen up here from underground lakes? The pipes run through the hangar, and the pumps are there. We're going to inspect them ; I'm the piper, you're my mate. Now here's exactly what we do, and keep your ears open because we've got to hurry."

For a man who looked as mad as Rakister, the plan sounded a pretty cool one.

The substitute lung-piper and his mate, the latter in dungarees, the former equipped with a tool case and necessary credentials, crossed from the rear entrance of the "Single Z" to the Trafalgar Gate.

There, the Turkish band was haggling its way through the smaller gate. Instruments blared saucily, for they had won a moral victory over the Customs officials and the coffin full of loot was getting through untouched. They were the centre of all eyes, which suited Rakister and Parrodyce well.

Rakister had obtained a good deal of information on lung-piping from the unfortunate off whom he had got his uniform. Parrodyce following, he marched boldly into the guard room, flashing a yellow pass.

They were well in before a corporal stopped them.

"Out of my way, sergeant," Rakister said. "We've got to get through here. There's an emergency job required on the underground piping. They phoned through about it, didn't they?"

"Not to my knowledge," the corporal said, "but I've only just come off watch. I'll have to wake up the sergeant, if you'll hang on."

"Wake the bloody sergeant if you like, but we must get on with it unless you want to be floating out on liquid oxygen. There's a break in X-235."

He had brushed past the corporal, and was in the tiny store behind the guard room proper. Through a doorway on their right they could see the rest of the detail sleeping in steel cots with their boots on.

At the far end of the store was a trap door. Rakister knelt down beside it, pulled out a bunch of keys and began unlocking the locks and snapping the seals.

"Hang on a bit for God's sake, man," the corporal said. "It won't take a minute, but whoever tampers with those seals has to sign a form."

"Give it me when I come up from the tunnel," said Rakister.

The corporal weakened. Evidently he did not consider that rousing a sleepy sergeant was too sound an idea.

"How long are you going to be?" he asked, indecision in his voice.

"An hour—eighty minutes," Rakister said. "Bring us down some tea, eh?"

"I'll still be here then," the corporal said with evident relief. "I'll go and get the form, if I can find it. I think it's a KH 725A."

He drifted back into the front room as Rakister pulled up the metal square. Parrodyce fished a torch out of the kit they had with them, and they climbed down into the depths, lowering the trap door on top of them.

"Wouldn't it have been playing safer if we had tipped that corporal down here and shut him up?" Parrodyce enquired.

"He knows he shouldn't have let us down here. Therefore he'll keep the secret better than we could," said Rakister, and Parrodyce knew he was right. In the old days, casual remarks like this, revealing Rakister's considerable working knowledge of human psychology, had surprised Parrodyce; he could not understand how a man with such contempt for his fellows gained that sort of wisdom. Now he saw it had been picked up selfishly, to gain Rakister's own ends. And in the same flash Parrodyce saw that his own usefulness was almost at an end. One of them was going to die shortly, and Parrodyce looked the likelier candidate so far.

"Well, I didn't need much help from you after all," Rakister said, almost as if reading the other's thoughts. "I was afraid we might have more than one dumb double-striper to cope with."

They stood beside the big, lagged, oxygen pipes; four

of them ran straight from darkness to darkness, in a tolerably wide tunnel stretching from outside the dome to the centre of the city. A notice on the wall proclaimed "It is Dangerous to touch these Pipes unless Insulated Gloves are worn". It was colder than a vault; their breath clouded and fell as rime on to the pipes.

"There should be a lung-piper's hut here," Rakister said. He took the torch and swung it round.

The "hut" was a deep alcove a couple of yards down the tunnel. They switched on an electric light and went in. Hoses hung on the wall, tools were stacked in racks. There were also two space suits.

"Get 'em on," Rakister said briefly.

The suits felt icy and were difficult to put on. They helped each other, trembling with cold. One of Parrodyce's teeth began to ache.

"We've got no time to lose," he said, and then realised it was something he was repeating over and over.

At last they were into the suits. With relief they switched on the heating circuits.

"Don't close your face-plate yet," Rakister said. "Then we can talk without using the intercom; someone else might be listening in over it. You go on first down the corridor; I'll follow. Stop at the outer lock."

Very nice, Parrodyce thought. And at the lock you can shoot me if you feel like it. Do you feel like it? I can't tell. I can't tell what anyone ever thinks, despite this freak gift I have. So I walk down this tunnel of darkness, round-shouldered, with a gun following. Perhaps someone more observant would know what Rakister felt like. He may have given himself away by some tiny item, just as Wyvern was betrayed by an impossible smile.

Just ahead of him in the long tunnel, the oxygen pipes were punctuated with taps worked by wheels. Hoses could be attached to these taps and the liquid syphoned off if a section of pipe had to be emptied for repairs. The taps pointed back down the tunnel the way they had come.

Parrodyce had no two thoughts about the matter.

Judging his distance, he flicked off the torch and ran to the nearest wheel. As he heaved it round, he heard Rakister call in astonishment. Then the liquid oxygen was

jetting out; he could feel it thundering through the cock. And he was shouting, cheering, blaspheming.

He switched the tap off after a long minute and flashed his torch.

Quickly he slammed his face plate shut. The lenses of his spectacles had iced over, and he had to wait till the suit heater had coped with the trouble before he could see again. The liquid he had released was boiling, misting up into the corridor, multiplying, writhing, blue, beastly, raw: the stuff of life in killer mood. Half hidden in the vapour, a figure lay across the pipes, frozen there. Parrodyce hurried away from it, a little nauseated.

It was not far to the overhead airlock. He climbed the ladder and heaved himself in, closing the hatch behind him with relief.

Three minutes later he was stepping out of the side of the hangar on to the moon's surface.

He had never been out alone. It was terrifying! He stood in the shadow of the dome and it was absolutely black. Parrodyce could not see the ground, the hangar or any particle of himself.

Some distance away—he could not tell how far—the world began, an intensely bright world with a biting background of peaks and stars that might have been only at arm's length. And in the foreground of this chunk of world, a line of figures were making towards a tracked bus; they bore a coffin with them; Fezzi Forta's boys were on their way.

Pulling himself together, Parrodyce forced himself to march across the black void to the light. He got to the vehicle as the last of the Turks was boarding. They hauled him up without question.

Gloating to himself, Parrodyce began to plan his next move. He had forgotten Wyvern; he was thinking of the telepathic girl.

VIII

"To say it in a way you would understand it," Bert the Brain explained, "I was so surprised I was speechless. I have not been out of order at all. I have been out of

action, voluntarily. The amount of knowledge you gave me to digest was more than the total volume I have received since I was started—not, I mean, your conscious knowledge, which was comparatively negligible, but the inherited and latent knowledge in you.”

“I did not realise,” Wyvern said, “that in that brief contact you had with me on the operating table you had learnt all you could.”

“You had expected the process to be what you call painful,” the brain answered. “I suppose the operation was brief, as you tell time; but once I had grasped one strand of the pattern I could predict and interpret the whole design. It is intensely interesting.”

Conversing with Bert was unlike ego-union. That process was always, basically, a clash of opposing forces, or a locking together of magnetic North and South. Bert had no character; his voice was thin water in the brain. Nothing was there of good or evil, personal ambition, altruism; he was intellect without will, potentiality without promise. There was no threat in him. He was power, but Wyvern was in command. Yet Wyvern was not satisfied.

“Now that you have the power of ego-union with others,” he asked. “Could you do a sort of hook-up with everyone?”

“Yes—through you. Only if you were in ego-union with them.”

Wyvern knew the machine would be reading the satisfaction his answer brought, and at once it added, “After that, I would have their pattern and could communicate with them on my own.”

“Which is how you communicate with me now, although we are not joined by power cables?”

“Precisely. I am supplying the stimulus, you supply the power.” It was a remark Wyvern would soon ruefully recall.

He drifted in a limbo. It was only a moment since he had dissolved before H’s secretary’s eyes, but his time values had altered, together with all his other senses. His vision, for instance, was diffused throughout his body; he was seeing through his cell structure, and on all sides stretched a wall of glass marbles—or so it appeared.

Actually, Bert told him, he was viewing the carefully stacked elements of his own body. Using the latent knowledge in Wyvern's own mind, Bert had unbonded his biochemical position; he was now escaping from the secretary in a wafer of matter a fraction of a millimetre thick—but the endless array of marbles seemed not to move.

"You can resume normal structure now," the machine advised.

"How?"

"I will guide."

"Where?"

"I cannot say what the place is."

"How can you see it?"

"Through your senses."

"Yet I cannot see it."

"You will learn."

And resuming normal structure was easy. Yet it was difficult. Snapping the fingers is easy; yet a one-year-old babe cannot manage it.

Wyvern was in a blank little office which looked disused. He was starving.

"This is only about fifty yards from where I found you," the wire voice in his head announced.

"I'm starving!" Wyvern cried.

He staggered over to the swivel chair and collapsed into it. He still wore the clothes he had taken from the guard, William; he was still peppered with terminals, and the basket of wire still crowned his head. But his flesh seemed to have atrophied, his bones showed, the skin stretched tight over his temples. His stomach felt like a walnut. He was in the last stages of starvation.

Bert realised his plight immediately.

"This is my fault," it exclaimed. "I had neglected a basic factor of human metabolism. You feed every five waking hours to maintain energy. That energy is easily consumed, and of course the sub-molecular transposition has entirely drained your energy supplies. I told you you were supplying the power. You must go in search of food at once."

"I worked that one out for myself," Wyvern said bitterly.

He staggered towards the doorway, wondering where he was, what aid he was likely to get. His hopes sank directly he looked outside: the corridor stretching either way was painted a drab grey and brown, the standard army colours. The opposite wall of the corridor was all glass. Wyvern looked out; he was on the top floor of a tall building. Overhead he could see the domes with their polar shields up.

"Not hopeful," he messaged to the machine.

Without bothering to take any precautions, he walked down the corridor, past two closed doors, to a self-service lift. A notice on it read: UP—HELICOPTERS ONLY. OUT OF BOUNDS TO OTHER RANKS. Wyvern pushed his way in.

"Going up," he said, and went up.

He emerged on top of the building in what at first was blinding light. When he got his bearings, he saw there were several army personnel about, officers in uniform, men in dungarees. Several helicopters were parked in a line, with one just landing.

Wyvern was beyond making any sort of pretence at concealment, nor was it easy to see what exactly he could have done to hide. He merely walked up to the nearest helicopter and flung open the cabin door. Someone called out to him at once.

"The one this end if you don't mind, sir."

Nodding curtly in reply to the mechanic who had shouted, Wyvern walked as steadily as he could down the line of air vehicles. As he reached the one designated, the mechanic pulled open the door and said humbly, "May I just see your pass, sir, please."

"Do I look as if I was on pleasure?" Wyvern asked, swinging himself up into the little cabin.

Indeed he looked a formidable sight. His gaunt form was clad still in the guard's white overall, and his basket-work halo still loomed over his skull.

"I must see your pass, sir; you know that," the mechanic persisted.

"Oh, very well, man," Wyvern said. In one of the overall pockets there was a blank report card. He flicked it

through the cabin door. As the mechanic swung to retrieve it, Wyvern switched on the engine and revved the rotors.

The mechanic was quick on the uptake. He wasted no time examining the card, but flung a spanner wildly at Wyvern; it missed, clanging harmlessly against the metal fuselage. At the same time he was yelling at a group of three officers who had been standing nearby, watching Wyvern curiously. They dashed at the machine.

It was beginning to lift when the first officer grabbed at the swinging door. Grimly, Wyvern applied full power. His altitude reached ten feet—and stayed there, the motors labouring angrily. The first officer was dragging himself up. The other officers were also hanging on. The mechanic ran just below the wheels, yelling blue murder and jumping to seize the axle.

"For heaven's sake, do something," Wyvern gasped to the brain.

"I *can't*. I'd kill you!" Bert replied. "If I drained off any more of your resources, you'd go out like a light."

Under the combined weight of the officers, the helicopter listed badly. If anything, it was losing height. They slid over to the edge of the building, a wounded bird swarming with rats. Carried away with excitement, the mechanic made one last jump for the axle, missed, and went plummeting into the depths below.

Wyvern's leg was seized. He looked frantically round for a weapon with which to break the officer's grasp, but there was nothing loose. Through the window he could see the faces of the two others, clinging and bellowing. He kicked furiously, but his strength was nothing; he began to slide diagonally across the floor of the helicopter.

"Let go, you crazy fool!" he shouted. "Let go or you'll kill us all!"

The other tugged the harder. Veins stood out on his forehead; one of his fellows had him by the trousers. It was only this that made him release Wyvern, and take a firmer grip on the passenger seat. Wyvern hauled himself back to the controls.

Their rate of fall was accelerating. The face of a building slid by, desperately close. These in-dome helicopters were light-weight jobs, designed only to carry a maximum

of two people. The extra load would be almost buckling the vanes!

Ahead was another block. They slanted past it, and were making for a lower part of the city, drifting towards Mandalay Gate. As Wyvern calculated it, they would be down before they struck the side of the dome. At that, they would probably hit a building first. He flung open the other door, preparing to jump and run at the first opportunity, if his flagging strength would allow him to. Beneath him swung a pattern of upturned faces and pointing hands. Another 'copter soared up nearby; a tele-camera projected from its cabin window.

So H and his secretary would probably already know where Wyvern was!

He edged closer to the opening.

"Don't be an idiot!" the lean voice said inside his mind. "Your human limbs are fragile and you do not yet know how to grow more. Don't jump! Let them catch you. They will think it in their own interest to keep you alive and restore you to health, for they do not realise I have already extracted from you all I wish. Sit tight."

It was good advice. But Wyvern neither took it or disregarded it, for that moment they struck a street pylon. The 'copter wrapped itself lovingly round the pylon and slithered to the ground with a mighty rending of metal. Existence became an affair of stars.

Everything was going to be well.

With that conviction Wyvern woke. He'd been back in his dreams to Stratton, walking among the beech copses, riding Nicky over the sweet bracken, swimming in the infant Yare.

And somehow in the dream everything had sorted itself out so easily. He had been refuelled, and the big computer had scooped him back to earth and the régime had crumbled and then Eileen South had appeared and then . . . And then he woke up.

He was in a hospital bed again.

Plus ça change, he thought wearily. But at least he had been fed intravenously. His limbs had plumped out, the hollows had gone from his cheeks. And they had re-

moved the terminals from his body. Wyvern felt his head ; stubble ran crisply over it, and the wire cage had gone. He looked human again. He sat up, feeling wonderful.

So Bert had been right! They wanted him alive ; they would think the computer still had everything to learn from him. If H's secretary suspected the truth, it hardly seemed likely he would dare tell H that Wyvern had just disappeared before his eyes ; for the new Leader, a materialist if ever Wyvern saw one, would dismiss the notion as fantastic. Which it was.

They would couple him back on to the machine—and he would vanish again. But this time for good.

"Hey!" he called. The sooner they fetched him the better. He could face them ; he could face anything with Bert on his side.

It occurred to him then : if they intended to couple him up again, why had they removed the terminals from his body?

"Bert!" he cried inside his head. "Bert!"

The machine did not answer, only the silence of the skull where its answer should have been.

Two guards entered the room, the usual wall-faced-looking entities who clicked for these bully jobs.

"Get up," one said in a wall-faced voice.

Wyvern did not like it. He hesitated, until an impatient movement from one of the guns decided him. He climbed out of bed.

"Put that coat on and come this way," one of the guards said, indicating a greatcoat on a peg. "And don't attempt to engage us in any kind of conversation."

Wyvern wondered remotely what kind of conversation it would have been possible to engage them in, but it seemed a poor time for argument ; meekly, he did as he was told. He was marched along a passage and up a flight of stairs, and locked into a featureless waiting room. Beyond the door he could hear voices and footsteps.

Uneasily he thought of all the captives in man's chequered history who from behind locked doors had listened to the unsettling clatter of boots and commands. It would have been better, he reflected, if the moon had

never been attainable, than it should be a mere extension of Earth's hard mazes.

He recalled a song and its casually grim words:

"Life goes on; no one's Irreplaceable."

Again he called Big Bert, but it was still mysteriously silent.

The door was flung open, this time by two different guards. They bundled him out to a yard and into a waiting van, climbing up after him. The vehicle moved off with a lurch and began to travel at speed. At one point, Wyvern thought he heard a shot fired at it.

A quarter of an hour later he was again standing before Colonel H and his secretary.

Colonel H was hardly recognisable. His face was flushed and heavy and his head was carried with a peculiar alertness not noticeable previously; he looked, Wyvern thought for the first time, a man to be reckoned with. He slammed a suitcase shut and stood up, glowering at Wyvern.

"Come through here," he commanded without any preliminaries, gesturing to an adjoining room.

Wyvern walked through. The secretary made to follow, but H thrust out his hand.

"You can stay here and cope with the paper work," he said sarcastically. "I'll deal with this hero."

He closed the door, and Wyvern and he were alone. The room was bare but for a metal stool and a blank telescreen in the ceiling. It would be years, at the present rate of so-called progress, before the warrens constructed on the moon were properly furnished; by and large, they looked less inviting than the craters outside.

H also looked ugly. Wyvern began another mental call for Big Bert, but still there was no reply.

"So you have me again," he observed.

"I only want the answer to one question, and then I'm going to shoot you," H said.

"That wouldn't be very clever of you," Wyvern said, not without trepidation, "or have you run another telepath to earth?"

"Not Parrodyce, if that's who you're thinking of—and he's got nothing better than a dose of gamma coming to him when we catch up with him. What you reckon we want another telepath for, eh?"

"To teach your computer to mind read, as you said," Wyvern replied.

"You've already done that," the Colonel said.

How had he found out? Had they found out, perhaps, from Bert itself? H did not leave Wyvern long in doubt.

"You fool," he said savagely, "didn't you realise that when you were communicating with Big Bert anyone within fifty yards could pick it up? One of the officers who pulled your 'copter down got out of the crash as lightly as you—the other two broke their necks, by the way—and he told us everything that went over between you."

It was convincing, crushing, final. The only excuse Wyvern had for not having realised it before was that the usual staggering thought emanations of ego-union had been absent during communication with Bert. Bert was not human: he had intellect but no ego. With him, it had been altogether a quiet, unsensational business. But Wyvern, of course, had opened his mind and had been sending at his usual strength. In the pressure of events, he had not realised it—and nor had Big Bert, which was significant; for it showed that the machine, being man-built, could on occasion act like a man and proceed without sifting all available data.

Even if he had realised that fact, he could have done no differently. It had been essential for Wyvern to communicate with Bert. The past was unalterable; and now the future seemed inevitable. For him, death only lay ahead; for mankind, whom Wyvern had imagined he could help, lay the long terror of spies loose in their very heads. And yet—and yet Big Bert had spoken only to Wyvern . . .

The hostile silence was broken by Colonel H.

"So you see you are of no further use to us," he said, and slowly drew a revolver from his hip holster.

"Then why did you go to all the trouble of reviving me and removing the wire network after my helicopter crashed?"

"Because I want the answer to one question."

"And that?"

Colonel H paused as if sorting his words carefully.

Then he said: "The machine was instructed to learn from you. It followed those instructions. It learnt the secrets of your freak mind so quickly that we were deceived, and when it closed itself down we could only presume there had been a failure somewhere before it had got to the information. We were wrong there, as we soon discovered. But the point I am interested in is this: when the brain opened itself up again and collaborated with you, it was acting directly contrary to its instructions. How and why was that possible?"

Wyvern leant against the cold wall. The revolver was lowered. The problem was indeed one in which he was deeply, vitally interested—yet at present his brain was working only on the surface.

"Perhaps the brain found out about something you never have—the sacredness of human life!" he said.

"Sacredness!" He exploded. "That sort of cant went out of date back in nineteen fifty! It's absolute rubbish! Your trouble is, you've had 3,000 calories a day all your life. It's put fat on your brain. You just think of me as a roughneck, Wyvern, don't you? You're wrong, wrong right down to your guts. I'm the new élite, I've learnt the facts of the modern world! I don't rule just by bullets—I rule by the iron rod of demography. At the end of the second world war, back in nineteen forty something, the world's population was only about 2,700 million; they couldn't visualise totalitarianism in England then, unless it was forced on 'em from outside. That's what they were guarding against, but it sneaked in and coshed 'em from behind. Why? Because world population—despite all the intervening bloodletting—had doubled. It's something like 5,500 millions now!"

"Are you trying to make some sort of apology?" Wyvern asked.

"No! It's bare facts. Growing population gobbling up dwindling resources. Average calorie intake falling. Fiercer struggles for less food, nation envying nation. Your bloated electorate turns into a starving rabble; below 2,000

calories a day, they forget what ballot slips are, they forget the subtle distinctions between things like Conservatism and Socialism. They have to be ruled by whips and bullets. You see, Wyvern, it's a law of nature.

"Take a damn good look at me, Wyvern. I'm Mother Nature personified!"

Irrelevantly, Wyvern thought: he's been drinking; that's why he's so flushed. It made no difference. The fellow might still be right, and the whole vast structure of human attainment thrown over to the new god, Calorie Intake.

"You find it necessary to explain yourself to me," Wyvern said. "I think a psychiatrist would find grave reasons behind your equating yourself with Mother Nature."

The gun was up again, staring motionless at Wyvern's stomach.

"I can bear what happens in my head while my belly's comfortable," H said. "Only sentimental fools like you think mental pain's worse than physical."

"You're kidding yourself, not me, H."

"Just tell me why the brain—*how* it could go against instructions," the colonel grated.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Stay out!" He roared, never taking his eyes off his prisoner. "Well, Wyvern, you must know."

Wyvern thought, "If only I still had the strength, I'd kill him by mental force. But now I know how much it requires, I just haven't the reserves."

Aloud, he said slowly, "I suppose the same sort of law governs Bert as governs your population. They turn instinctively from the old to the new, believing it to hold more promise. Bert thinks I hold more promise; and because the basic premises of his being include the rule Expand—the old Biblical 'Multiply and be fruitful', H, which works so nicely for you!—he must follow *me*, for I teach him more than you. Through me, he finds everything accessible."

"No longer!" H declared. "We blew him up completely soon after you crashed."

Suddenly Wyvern found he was laughing weakly. It was

ironical. He had once schemed with Parrodyce for this. Now they had played into his hands; and instead of triumph—he had lost his best friend!

"I just wanted your confirmation on that point," H said heavily. "It was only what we had already deduced; that was why we had to destroy Bert. I am sorry that we are at present in hiding, and consequently you have to go out this way instead of more slowly, as my secretary would have preferred."

And he raised the gun with easy efficiency and squeezed the trigger.

IX

In hiding! So the new Leader and his secretary were in as poor a position as that! Wyvern recalled that there had been a greatcoat draped over luggage in the outer room, ready for a quick getaway. In England, H was secure, but here on Luna his position was weak, and no doubt a spaceship was already due to take him back to Earth and a bevy of guards.

Without hesitation, Wyvern opened his mind to full blast. He conveyed a concise mental picture of the route by which he had been brought to H's room. The necessary effort dizzied him, but he felt contact with about forty minds which were within receiving distance of his impulse. Rainbow-feeling reactions of fear, surprise, triumph, excitement and gratitude pierced him. He felt H stagger under the mental shock, and the secretary outside explode in fury.

Rebel forces were evidently very near the room; even as their kaleidoscopic impressions seeped to him, Wyvern shut off contact and dived for H's legs. The Colonel brought up his knee, striking Wyvern's shoulder, and they both rolled on to the ground.

H had dropped his revolver, but Wyvern in his weakened state was no match for him. H kicked out with his heavy boot at Wyvern's chest and sent the latter sprawling over the floor. With one pounce, H was on to his gun and bringing it up again.

At that moment, the door was flung open and H's secretary appeared. He also was armed. He fired, without hesitation, a single shot.

And at the same moment a terrific charge of mental force enfolded Wyvern, and a voice spoke inside his head.

"At last we've reached you, Conrad! To get the distance we had to use a tight beam, and we couldn't pick you up until you sent just then and accidentally gave us a direction on you."

"Eileen!" he answered mutely, "Eileen South!"

Unmistakably it was she. The timbre of her thought, the pitch of her mind, were unalterably hers. Her hair slanted across his face like rain, she was a cool breeze through his tiredness.

They began exchanging ideas and information with lightning speed. There were no misunderstandings, no concealments.

"How are you managing to reach me, Eileen?"

"I am in the American Sector."

"So far?"

"I am linked to Fall Guy, their computer, as you were linked to Big Bert."

"Pain, my darling . . ."

"Joy . . ."

"I knew of you—it seems so long ago. How did you know of me?"

"I have only just known, Conrad. A man called Parrodyce . . ." She flashed Wyvern what Parrodyce had revealed to her of his escape.

"So he got through! Yes, I know what you feel about him, dear. When I first found out about you, you were following a man called Dorgen."

"The man with the impossible smile."

"What happened?"

"It was only by accident I read his thought—and found he had killed Jim Bull, the old Leader. I felt I had to follow him; you see, I'm one of the Democrats, the underground, and I knew Dorgen was important. But then I realised I had been sending! Anyone might have picked me up. So I made for the American Sector as quickly as possible. You must join us here."

He sketched his present predicament to her.

And the whole time, he was promising her the sun on the wild acres of Stratton and they were weaving cross-currents of love. Then he broke contact.

It had all taken a fragment of a second. Wyvern still sat huddled on the floor. H crouched like a cat, with his revolver in his hand. The secretary was firing from the door.

Following the first bullet came another, and another, and another, each bursting into flesh. Crazily, it seemed as if they might go on pouring forever into their target, leaving it eternally unharmed. And then, on the fifth shot, H fell on to his face; a convulsion of his hand muscles firing his gun, his arm moved in an arc with the recoil and was still. He did not move again.

"You see," the secretary said unsteadily. "I've killed him. I've killed him!"

Wyvern got limply to his feet. There was a bitter stink of explosive in the room, and his ears rang with sound.

"I shot him!" the secretary repeated. "You see that'll show them I had no sympathy with him! They've got us cornered—they'll be here any minute now you've given us away. But they won't kill me now. They'll see . . . it'll prove I was faithful to the People. You're my witness, Wyvern."

"You must look after yourself, as you've always done," Wyvern said tiredly.

The other seized his arm.

"You appealed to me once," he said. "Now I'm appealing to you, Wyvern. They'll believe you because you can tell them telepathically. Tell them I was H's dupe or anything, but let them know I shot H—it was him they were really after. I have saved your life, you know."

"You'll have to take your chance," Wyvern told him.

The secretary grabbed his wrists and thrust his blazing white face into Wyvern's.

"I'll tell you something," he hissed. "Something nobody but I knows now that H is dead. You knew Dorgen killed OBL, Jim Bull. He hid behind the wall of OBL's bathroom, waiting his chance; then he made his getaway to the

moon. That all took organisation. H supplied the organisation! He wasn't head of the New Police for nothing; he wanted to get higher. He personally had Dorgen walled up while the barracks was being redecorated."

"And you knew all the time!"

"I didn't know till it was too late," the secretary said. Wyvern doubted the truth of that statement; he had the power of checking it telepathically, but shrunk from the thought of ego-union with this intriguer.

"Directly the killing had been done," the latter continued, "H was uneasy. He thought the underground might get to Dorgen, or Dorgen go to them. He decided we must come here personally, follow Dorgen and kill him; and that happened to fit our other plans. We left with Parrodyce and his assistant, Rakister."

"I know," Wyvern said. "Because you might need an inquisitor here, and Rakister was just the sort of ruffian to erase Dorgen for you."

"It had to be done," the secretary said earnestly.

"And then when Rakister had finished Dorgen, I suppose you put someone on to Rakister?" remarked Wyvern with sarcasm.

"He was untrustworthy," the secretary said. "We have not yet traced him. Things are in a bad way. Perhaps even now we may hold out here till relief comes—it's due."

As he spoke, the telescreen in the ceiling lit. This building, Wyvern later discovered, had been scheduled as a solar system museum, but the global wars had crippled the project before it was half-completed, and the great mausoleum was empty of all but a few relics. The telecommunications, however, functioned perfectly. Apart from this defect, the building had made an ideal hiding place for H and his retinue.

The ceiling screen lit. The foyer, where the intercom controls were, was revealed. It had been an easy matter for the rebels, on Wyvern's signal, to burst down the main door, overpower H's small guard force, and seize the controls. With these they were now conducting a telesearch of each room in turn.

Elated at their discovery, faces pressed down on Wyvern

and the secretary from above, distorting and ballooning as they swayed too close for focus. Their mouths seemed to open and shut soundlessly, like whales closing in on plankton.

With one shot, the secretary brought most of the screen shattering down on their heads. Shaking the splinters out of his hair, he burst from the chamber. He jumped the luggage in the next room and ran to the outer door, reloading his revolver as he did so. At the door he halted abruptly and turned back.

"They're coming down the corridor," he said grimly. "So in case I don't get out of this mess, here's something for you, who landed me in it."

He fired. They were standing only five yards apart.

A bullet does not take long to travel five yards.

In that hairsbreadth of time, the history of man unrolled ten thousand years forward: for Wyvern *remembered*.

He recalled what Big Bert had said about finding in Wyvern's mind knowledge of a miraculous kind such as man hardly dreamed of possessing; the unbonding of Wyvern's chemical structure had been only one fragment of that treasury knowledge.

The bullet had travelled one yard . . .

How had that knowledge ever been forgotten? In a flash of insight, Wyvern saw it had just been overlooked, just as a man may live a week without realising that he breathes all the while. And this knowledge, being fundamental, had been more fundamentally overlooked.

The bullet had travelled two yards . . .

How had that knowledge been there to begin with? To Wyvern, his entire ratiocinative processes having been sieved by Big Bert, the answer was suddenly clear. Now that he had tapped down to that knowledge he was drinking at the fount of life itself. This blind intelligence had sprung armed upon the primeval amoebae, and from them had fashioned the bacillus, the pachyderm, the mesembryanthemum, the homo sapiens.

The bullet had travelled three yards . . .

So Wyvern held the shape of the universe in his hands. He stood with it, humbled.

The bullet had travelled four yards . . .

Only by the pressure of the past and the imminence of death—and the face that he had always been alone among men—had Wyvern discovered this revolution. He could now harness the power that had harnessed him: and there was a world dying for the word he knew.

The bullet had travelled five yards . . .

But Wyvern was a splint of light, darting through the big dome, out through the chill of space, over to the American Sector.

She was trembling.

"I don't like to contemplate the future of the world," she said. "It has been—well, cosy to be human."

"There will be few who will be able to learn what we can teach, Eileen," Wyvern said. "We few will have to act as guardians to the many."

"So much to do," she sighed. "First you must rest. Promise me that!"

"We'll go a million light years away," he promised. "Have you never wondered—what is beyond this universe?"

"Don't," she said, half-laughing. "There's enough trouble here without casting so far afield."

"Talking of trouble," he said, "What's become of Parrodyce? I promised to do something for him if he reached you."

"I know. I did it for you. It was not easy; I had to go down and down into the lower reaches of his mind."

Wyvern clutched her hand sympathetically. He knew something of the state of Parrodyce's mind.

"He was a sick man," she said.

"Of course I found the cause in the end, buried away, like a splinter sunk into flesh. As Parrodyce was being born, he uttered a telepathic scream; his mother was a weak creature, who died almost at once of a cerebral haemorrhage. He had carried the guilt of it about ever since."

"Is he better now?" Wyvern asked. "We shall need all the help we can get. Would he be fit to share the new knowledge? Where is he?"

Eileen laughed, and then bit her lip.

"He's certainly better—or changed anyhow. He became very friendly with a small band. They brought him to the American Sector, but he's now gone back to the Turkish Dome with them ; it appears they needed a new zither man and Parrodyce got the job, if you can imagine it. So we shall have to manage on our own at first, my darling."

He could think of nothing in all the new dimensions of the world he would have liked better.

—JAEEL CRACKEN

GREAT & SMALL

by G. L. Lack

Above his head there was a fly buzzing. He could not see it for his eyes were closed, the lids heavy as coins.

The fly circled, descending in a spiral that traced a path of orange dots in his mind. The buzzing came nearer. He knew that the fly was just above his face and he prepared himself for the touch of legs or wings on his skin as he had done in bed when a child.

Momentarily the fly touched his nose making his nostrils twitch. The touch was so gentle ; why was it that the whole body lay tense in anticipation for such a little thing? Now it had swung away again in widening circles until the insistent buzzing was far away.

Suddenly he knew that he did not want it to go. It was a reality he was clinging to. For a second the sound was muted then continued again and he realised that he had been holding his breath in straining to catch the faint noise.

The fly spiralled towards him again.

Now he was thinking more clearly although his muscles seemed lifeless and his mind ticked over in slow motion. Where was he? Why were his eyes shut and why was he tired? Why was a lone fly so important?

There was something wrong ; not just the inertness of his body but the fact that he needed an external symbol to grasp. A memory lay deep. He dragged it up through coils of irrelevancies like a primeval animal emerging from the black slimy mud of centuries. And when it came there was no sudden moment of realisation. Once the answer lay exposed it was as if he had known it all the time.

Flies were extinct—they had all been destroyed in World Pesticide Year when he was nine years old.

To open his eyes was an effort. However once he had done so he felt that he was in full control of his faculties.

The ceiling and walls were dark green. The lighting was artificial yet something told him that it was still daylight outside. There were no windows.

The room had a dry smell, not antiseptic yet vaguely salty and definitely hospital-like. He turned his head to find that his neck was stiff. With the movement he recalled his last memory before becoming unconscious. It was of a sharp click that denoted the switching off of a machine.

Above his leg was a shiny steel cylindrical arm extending from a unit at the side of the room. Clipped into the arm was a metal and plastic cone with its small end focused just below his knee.

This was a radiography room. Had he been forgotten with the active beam streaming into his leg? He strained to hear the faint sound that was little more than a vibration which indicated that the machine was in use. For a second he panicked until he realised that the noise he heard was erratic and came from the fly and not the machine. He rolled over. The inspection window was closed and the red warning light over the door was off.

How long had he been in the room? The daily dose he had been receiving was of three minutes duration. He had left his clothes in the cubicle outside and in them his wristwatch. It had been a quarter to eleven in the morning when he had looked at it last. He must have fallen asleep during the treatment and lost all count of time. Surely time could not pass so slowly? He began to count but after thirty-five he lost track as his mind followed the buzzing of the fly. For the first time he caught sight of it zig-zagging along the dark green wall as if attempting to find an exit.

He pulled his mind away from the insect. Why was he still waiting? Long since he had given up trying to understand the ways of the hospital. One day he would be kept waiting for hours for no apparent reason; another he would be called in as soon as he arrived and was driving home again within twenty minutes.

He rolled from the narrow bed and slipped on the striped dressing gown that was thin and faded with constant washing. The sliding door was unlocked. It rolled back easily and he looked cautiously into the next room which

was really part of a corridor partitioned off by a screen. The girl radiographer was slumped across her table. He put his hand on her shoulder. She was quite cold and stiff. He swung round to the doorway which led to the open corridor. Outside the others were still waiting. The curly haired man with the foreign accent lay sprawled across two chairs. The old woman who was brought from the wards daily sat in her wheelchair looking in death much the same as she had on other days. On the floor the young girl with breast cancer lay crumpled, her knees drawn up to her stomach.

There were no sounds at all. Although it was July a chill wind blew along the bare corridor and he shivered in the drab robe. Quickly he went into the small cubicle and slipped into his clothes.

His watch said half past three.

Further along the corridor beyond the swing doors a doctor in a white coat lay as he had collapsed in mid-stride. The appointments clerk lay by the side of her desk. He could hear no voices, no clattering from the kitchens, no trolley wheels, just the draught that soughed along the wide corridors.

He ran, throwing open doors, jumping over bodies, through the corridors, wards and offices. Outside on the lawn a gardener lay spreadeagled. His motor mower was twenty yards away where it had crashed against a tree, its runaway path marked by an erratic swath of mown grass.

He ran back to the radiotherapy department in the hope that some person may have been left in the same circumstances as himself. Two of the treatment rooms were empty; in a third the door was open and a patient lay dead on the narrow bed. The door of the single cobalt unit was closed. He peered through the inspection window over the shoulders of the lifeless operator. One glance was enough to turn his stomach even after the multiplicity of corpses he had seen. The machine had been left on.

He was sure that he was the only one alive in the hospital and he retraced his steps to an exit. A cat lay dead on the stairs.

He unlocked his car which was stifling inside after the heat of the afternoon; he wound down the windows on both sides. Before pulling the starter the thought sprang

into his mind that the engine might be dead also. It fired first time.

As he shifted into the gear there was a buzzing sound near his ear. The fly had followed him. In spite of the heat some sudden instinct made him wind up the windows. He drove off round the hospital between the prefabricated wooden extensions, weaving around vehicles which stood stranded at strange angles or were smashed against walls.

"We can't be the only ones," he said aloud as the car swung from the rose-lined drive into the main road. "Once we get away from the hospital . . ." It was only after he had swerved to avoid a wrecked lorry and passed a woman dead by her pram that he realised he had spoken in the plural.

He slowed to a crawl as he pondered on what to do. There seemed little point in going to his digs in town or to his widowed mother's the other side of the county. He had often read reviews of books where the survivors were in the same predicament as himself but, as he was no great reader, had never read the books to see how it could all work out. What were the great problems? Disease and the struggle of those left alive against marauding bands were the only ones he recalled. It seemed however that he was the sole living human, at least in this area, although to be on the safe side he decided to avoid towns and to stay the night somewhere out in the country and think things out.

Becoming conscious of his weariness he remembered that he had not eaten since breakfast and decided to stop in the next village. He pulled up at a general stores, making a mental list of his requirements at the same time, which gradually became oral. "Some fruit I think. How about bananas? And a cup of tea would be very welcome. This shop seems to sell everything and probably has a pressure stove. Now what shall I do about you?" He addressed the fly who was fussing in the windscreen on the passenger side. "If I get out quickly and shut the door . . ." He turned the handle, opened the door a foot and slipped out, slamming it behind him. In the instant of closing the door the fly projected itself into the open air like a child's missile from a miniature launching pad.

"Damn!" The fly passed his face and he was unable to follow its flight against the background of the ivy covered walls of a neighbouring house. Also it had fallen silent. He stood for a moment scanning the walls and windows but he could not see it. He shrugged his shoulders as if to convince himself that the loss was not really of importance and pushed the shop door open. The tinkle of the bell sounded strangely on his ears, an echo from a world that had ended suddenly. He wondered how long it would be before he would not expect a shopkeeper to appear when a bell summoned. There was plenty of fruit in boxes in front of the counter: bananas, oranges, grapes and tomatoes. He was able to reach tea and sugar without going behind the counter and he did not want to know if anyone lay there.

At the rear of the shop was a hardware section, with pressure stove, meths and saucepans prominently displayed. Paraffin? Usually it was kept in a drum at the back. He hesitated, then saw a can already filled near the door obviously left ready for a customer to collect. He had all that he needed except water. He tried to think of a place where he might find a tap without having to enter a house—a farmyard seemed to be the answer. He put all his booty in a couple of plastic buckets. He no longer felt that at any moment a voice would demand "What are you doing?" and a heavy hand descend on his shoulder.

As he made for the door he noticed some jars of jam on a shelf. Perhaps . . .? A picture from long ago came into his mind of a jar with a perforated lid, half-filled with water and trapped wasps buzzing inside. He picked up a jar. Outside he prised off the lid and stood the jar on the bonnet of the car. He tossed the plastic buckets on to the rear seat, retaining only a couple of bananas. He peeled them and swallowed hungrily. His eyes were fixed on the open jampot when he heard a buzzing from inside the car. The fly was flitting around in its favourite spot in the lower corner of the passenger windscreen.

"You little so-and-so. You've been hiding there." He was aware of the relief in his voice and knew that his face had split into a foolish grin of welcome. "Well, here's a present for you—jam, the best strawberry variety."

He slipped into the driving seat. He no longer slammed

the door quickly behind him but nevertheless did not open any windows.

"Next," he said, "we're having a cup of tea."

There was a large farmyard about a mile down the road with a duckless pond near the gate and leggy Dutch barns half filled with hay dwarfing the farmhouse which was no larger than a labourer's cottage and built of flint. He drove between the sheds into a small gravelled yard. A tap protruded from a wooden box on the wall of an outbuilding. He let down one side of a nearby trailer and used its floor as a shelf on which he set up the stove and laid out the food. The hissing of the pressure stove soon drowned the sound of the fly which had been insistently buzzing again.

For a few minutes it had circled round him, then made off in undulating flight across the yard. He found that his eye had become accustomed to following its movement against the sky and in front of irregular backgrounds. Occasionally it returned to circle near him, then would fly away again.

Another memory of his childhood came back—it was strange that so many forgotten things had been recalled in one day—on fine clear summer evenings such as this swarms of gnats would gather by the river in an ever-moving cloud over the water with swallows taking a victim at random wheeling high in the sky.

"All those gnats mean that it will be a fine day tomorrow," his grandfather would say.

"But the swallows are swooping low, William," his grandmother would reply.

"High or low, it'll be fine. You mark my words."

The water boiled. He tossed in some tea leaves and remembered that he had no cup. In the car boot he had a flask. He unscrewed the top and poured the tea in, attempting to stop the leaves from entering.

"No milk, my friend, I'm afraid I forgot. We shall have to learn self-sufficiency. A pity I was never a Boy Scout. I don't suppose you were?"

Buzz.

He drank the brown liquid almost boiling hot so that it struck the back of his throat like inhaling cigarette smoke after a spell of abstinence.

"Ah, that's better. Now I'd like a cigarette but I believe the smoke might upset you."

Zzzzzz.

"Now what's the time? Half past nine and time we went to bed. Or do you sleep only in the winter? It's been a funny old day."

For no apparent reason the word *ephemeral* jumped into his mind. "I hope *you're* not. Sometimes I must look you up in an encyclopaedia, I'm not much of an . . ." the word eluded him, ". . . insect expert."

In a barn he found a bundle of sacks ready for harvest. He made a bed from them and settled down. Dusk came quickly and after some time he fell asleep.

He woke in the middle of the night. There was little moon and the stars twinkled. He sat up looking through the open door at the sky. As a boy he had known all the constellations but this knowledge had faded with the accumulation of technical facts in adolescence. Now the patterns stood out prominently but he could not put a name to them. Why had he not seen them clearly for so long? Sleep was overtaking him again when the answer came—he had been unable to see the constellations for so long because there had been too many bodies between, confusing and masking the heavens.

Now the radiation brooms had gone. The clusters of satellites whose job it was to absorb the particles which bombarded the atmosphere from the radioactive belts were no longer there. Had the hundred billion to one chance occurred—that the sweepers had been drawn off into space in one direction only, thus enveloping the Earth on their journey? It accounted for the mass death and for the fact that all was apparently safe now. Was he on a planet free at last of man's ambition and folly?

In the morning he woke with sunshine streaming on his face. For breakfast he boiled two eggs and as he ate them he reflected that they were some of the last he would be able to have.

The fly buzzed around the open jar of jam.

"We'll be on a vegetarian diet soon—me sooner than you," he added.

He had made up his mind, while lying in the sun waiting for the expected farmyard sounds that never came, to visit as many hospitals as he could in one day to see if there was perhaps someone else left alive from the same circumstances as himself. He knew London well, however he was forced to drive slowly in order to avoid the wrecked vehicles. In places it was necessary to reverse and find alternative routes because of the blockages. Inside the hospitals he followed the signs to radiotherapy departments to meet only more death. It was cruelly tiring. The corridors seemed endless and since no elevators were working he had to use the stairs. Sometimes the fly came with him for a short time; more often it stayed buzzing in the windscreen of the car.

By afternoon, after leaving the gaunt red building of University College Hospital, he had decided to quit the search. "I've had enough," he said. "Let's get away from here."

The smell of death pervaded the air now. It was no longer a sleeping world ready to wake up at the magic command, but a cemetery of open graves. The sun shone brightly and it was hotter than he could ever remember, as if mocking the city for the many drab days it had endured under habitation. An obstruction of corpses made up his mind for him. He would make for the coast where the sea breezes might blow away some of the inevitable stink from the land.

"You will enjoy it," he said. "Your kind used to love living on the sands. Shall I close the window?"

He left a side window open for ventilation. The fields of Surrey and Sussex were in their full summer glory. The rain of previous days had freshened the pastures of the vales and with recent sunshine the cornfields of the ploughed up downs had begun to change from straw-green to gold.

"It will be a strange harvest this year, fly. Just you and I gathering for the winter months; a couple of amateurs." His laugh was high-pitched.

Along a narrow coastal road was a camping site, crowded with caravans and brightly coloured tents. On an impulse he drove up the gravel entrance. He got out of the

car and strolled around trying to keep his eyes above ground level so that he should see only the caravans and cars. It was not long before he found a small two-berth model which seemed ideal for his needs. By its side a small car was parked but he decided to choose a powerful model. Not far away was a new dove-grey Rover, turbo-driven, attached to a big six berther. With some difficulty he unhitched the caravan then drove the car to the lightweight model and clipped on the towing bar.

He returned with his new outfit to the side of his own vehicle. The fly was in its accustomed place. "Now for a difficult job," he said. "How can I tell you that you will have to change your residence?" He paused to think. "Will the jam lure work or shall I have to find some other way?"

He picked up the jam from the car floor, moving the jar slowly towards the door. The fly circled the pot warily then returned to the windscreen. He passed the jar across the passenger seat and this time the fly ignored it altogether. After several more unsuccessful attempts he just left the two cars with the adjacent doors open and sat nonchalantly in the Rover examining the controls and dashboard lay-out. The fly showed no signs of moving.

He became impatient, not wishing to lose contact with the living creature yet sick of the smell of death that surrounded them. He spent a further ten minutes or so looking at the interior and fittings of the caravan. Its design was simple: divan at one end, cooking unit at the other and plenty of locker space. The gas cylinder was quite light so he took another from a nearby caravan and also transferred the pressure stove. The fly still flitted around in the window of the old car.

"If I drive off, will you follow me like a dog?" Somehow he did not think so.

The doorway of the van from which he had taken the gas bottle was screened by strips of red and white plastic suspended from the lintel. He ripped one of them off, laid it on the bonnet of his car and smeared jam along it with a spoon. Next he placed the strip from one car to the other, hoping that the fly would follow the sticky trail.

His handiwork was ignored.

Perhaps if he left it alone for a while . . . ? He

walked off to the side of the field and sat on a fence with his back to the site looking across acres of ripe corn. He lit a cigarette. It was his first since he and the fly had been together but smoking had never been a strong habit with him and to give it up had been no hardship.

Why not leave anyway? The insect could not have long to live and there was enough risk of contamination without a fly touching his food.

When the cigarette was finished he ground out the butt with his foot and returned to the car. There was an angry buzzing. The fly had landed on the sticky plastic strip, had adhered to it and was in a frenzy trying to escape. Carefully he picked up the strip, letting both ends dangle to the floor in front of the Rover's passenger seat. Still holding the fly trap carefully he shut the doors and wound up the windows before examining the insect's predicament. Threads of jam clung tenaciously to the fly's legs. He did not wish to harm it and with a matchstick cleaned the jam away little by little until the fly freed itself by its own strength, flying to the windscreen and settling down in a corner silently. He tried to imagine the effort of the extrication on a human scale and recalled once seeing a film of a negro who had been sucked into an asphalt lake in Trinidad from which he had been rescued at the last minute and took weeks to recover.

An occasional movement of feet and wings told him that the fly was alive. He drove away with the unfamiliar load of the caravan behind. The sun was shining brightly making the Channel bluer than he had ever known it before. He found a bay by taking a farm road and parked almost on the beach. He sat on the step of the caravan while boiling some water for a cup of tea.

Soon he heard the familiar sound. The fly circled in front of him, then it remained there buzzing angrily. He knelt down to look at it and could see that its legs, to which some jam still clung, had become coated with sand grains, weighing the insect down. He moved it with his finger but saw that he would only do it harm.

He poured a little warm water into a saucer, then carefully digging with a spoon under the spot where the fly lay, he lifted up a plug of sand with the insect on top and

lowered it gently into the water. Speck by speck with a matchstick he removed the grains of sand until the fly was standing freely in the warm water. It kicked its thin legs, agitating the water and soon all the jam on it was washed away. Within a minute it was airborne again.

He made a cup of tea and sat watching rather as a pigeon fancier observes his birds when they are released. Its spiralling and swooping filled him with satisfaction.

The coast seemed wonderful. A breeze from across the waves held no hint of coolness, yet was fresh to the skin. He lay comfortably on the sand, a hollow scooped out for his hip. The sun on his face, the gentle lapping of the waves and the buzzing of the fly lulled him into sleep with a smile on his face.

For a few minutes the fly circled the man, almost touching the smiling face, then it headed off along the beach, keeping quite low. From somewhere another joined it in undulating flight. And another. Many others.

G. L. LACK

PLOOP

by Ron Pritchett

Ploop was hungry. From his vantage point high above the scorched plain he watched the newcomers as they busied themselves around the giant artifact. At first there had been food aplenty—much more than the Igru had fed him with.

But gradually the supply diminished, until now there was none to be had at all. No food. Ploop could manage a long time—months, in fact—without food, but it had been so long now that his metabolism was slowing down. He had been solely dependent upon the Igru for his food until the arrival of the strangers. Now the Igru were no more.

It had all been very puzzling to Ploop. For as long as he could remember there had been himself and the Igru—and nothing else. He had never in all his wanderings seen another animal. He was the only one of his kind and the Igru had looked upon him as a sort of god. They had built his temple and fed him for a thousand years.

With the arrival of the gigantic home of the strangers all this had altered. Their home had arrived overnight, as if it had dropped from the stars. The Igru had panicked immediately and literally thrown themselves at the strange bulk which had so suddenly appeared to dominate the village.

Ploop had watched all this with a detached interest. As long as he was fed he did not bother himself unduly with the affairs of the Igru. He had, however, been mildly surprised when the visitors had shown themselves. They were different, in some respects, to the Igru. They were taller, and practically hairless, and mostly of paler skins. But they were definitely Igru-type and not Ploop-type beings, so Ploop's interest in them faded.

There had been a lot of noise, he recalled, the Igru making most of it. He had seen one of the newcomers

point a tube at the noisiest Igru—and both the noise and the Igru had vanished. The noise from the other Igru then redoubled itself and Ploop had wandered away to find a quieter spot where he could sleep.

When he had returned, the strangers and their home were still there, but no Igru. There was, however, abundant food, so Ploop stayed in his temple and forgot, or almost forgot, the Igru.

Until the food had run out.

Then he had conducted a fruitless search over twenty square miles, but saw not a sign of the Igru. They had vanished without trace.

The only hope now was the strangers. Ploop hoped he would be able to make them understand his needs. Now was the time, he decided, to show himself and try to obtain that all-important food. Another few days and he would be too weak.

Boldly he started down the hill and made directly for the little encampment which the newcomers had set up around their artifact. The strangers were so busy that Ploop went unnoticed until he was only a few feet away from the nearest of them. This one, half as high again as the tallest of the Igru, wore a strange red and brown garment which seemed to flow from his neck to his feet without impeding his movements in any way. Only the most influential of the Igru had worn anything at all, so this being must be very important in his tribe, thought Ploop.

When the stranger turned and saw Ploop for the first time he started. His hand went to the little tube he carried at his waist and then came away again.

"Why, it's a dog!" he cried.

The other members of the party all turned to look at Ploop, who wagged his tail, not knowing what was expected of him in reply to all this attention.

"Looks friendly enough, Jake," said one of the others. "Rum sort of dog, though."

"He's a dog," insisted Jake, bending down to pat Ploop. "Used to have one just like him Earthside."

"Be careful, Jake," said yet another. "Remember that queer life-form on Procyon II?"

"You've got a nasty, suspicious mind," replied Jake.

"This pooch radiates friendliness. Those Queebles struck me as hostile critters from the start."

Ploop rolled over and Jake tickled his belly.

"Look, fellows, there's no harm in this little guy. Let's see if we can find you something to eat, old pal."

He strode off and entered the giant gleaming building which now stretched across half of Ploop's view and seemed to reach clear up to the sky.

He returned a few moments later with a dish full of white liquid. "Here, old boy, try some of this. It's all cook'll let me have at the moment," he apologized.

He set it down in front of Ploop, who sniffed at it and circled it warily. What was he supposed to do with this? He wondered. Something was expected of him.

Ploop looked appealingly up at Jake, who in turn gazed down expectantly at him. Ploop was desperately anxious to please these newcomers, so he took the only course he could think of at the moment. He sat in it.

A roar of laughter greeted this action and Jake snorted in disgust.

"So much for your dog, Jake," said someone. "It probably lives on fried asteroids, not dried milk."

The strangers all turned back to their various tasks and Ploop was ignored. He sat forlornly in the bowl, realising that his attempt to communicate with the tall strangers had failed. He didn't understand them, either. What else was a dish of liquid for, if not to sit in? It wasn't large enough for him to swim in.

Still the strangers ignored him, so sadly Ploop climbed out and shook himself. He felt weaker than ever. He must get food today, he decided, otherwise he would be too far gone to absorb it.

His eyes fell upon the entrance to the strangers' home, through which the one called Jake had gone to fetch the bowl of white stuff for him. It was still open.

Casually he wandered up to it. He didn't want to appear too eager to gain entrance into the strangers' home in case they didn't like the idea. Even the Igru had not encouraged him into their homes, which, as far as the exteriors were concerned anyway, were rude beyond belief compared with the palatial house of the newcomers.

He looked around. No-one was looking his way, so he summoned his strength and leapt onto the step, which was level with his head. Once inside, he looked back and saw that none of the strangers had noticed his entrance into their abode. He was in a tiny oblong passage, which, even by Igru standards, could not be called a room. He pushed with his forepaws on the far wall and with a click it came easily open. Here was a real room. It was full of objects which meant absolutely nothing to Ploop. He wandered around sniffing at everything, but all the smells were strange. After a few minutes he came across another opening and went through to find himself in an even larger room. Here the objects were not so varied, the majority of them conforming to the same shape. Also, he recognised one of the smells. It was wood. Not the trees of his beloved forest, but the same material, nevertheless.

There was a noise, as well. A ticking that came from over to his left. He walked in that direction and the ticking grew louder. It was coming from a small black box set in the wall. A dial on the box showed a little pointer furiously leaping back and forth.

So engrossed in this discovery was Ploop that he hadn't noticed one of the strangers enter the room by another door.

"Hey, where'd you come from?" he shouted, making Ploop jump. "What the—Holy smoke!" The stranger's face went even paler than its normal pallid pink as he spied the rapidly moving pointer in the dial.

Ploop ran as fast as his weary legs would let him, making for the door which would lead him outside. The stranger, licking his lips nervously, followed at a respectful distance, one eye on the little box, the other on Ploop.

Ploop burst out into the sunshine and fell in a heap on the ground. He had forgotten the leap he'd had to make in order to enter the strangers' home.

Painfully he struggled to his feet and limped away. It was no good, he thought. The strangers either didn't understand or didn't want to feed him. He couldn't feed himself and the Igru were gone. All that was left now was for him to find a peaceful spot—his temple—where he could lay down and die.

The stranger was in the doorway now, shouting to his comrades.

"Keep away from that dog! It's radio-active."

"What's that?" One of the newcomers looked up sharply. "How do you know that, Clem?"

"It was in the ship. The Geiger counter went crazy."

"You been on the bottle again, feller?" The other looked shrewdly at the one in the doorway.

"No. It's the truth, I tell you." Clem grimaced. "That cur's as hot as the ship's pile."

By now, Ploop was outside the group. He turned at the commotion, wondering if at last the strangers from the stars, or wherever they had come from, were going to do something to help him. They seemed more interested in him now than they had been all along. Each eye was on him, and he wondered even now if he could make them understand. He took a faltering step towards Jake, the one who had shown such interest in him earlier.

"No, shoo, boy, shoo!" Jake backed away, waving his arms about as he did so.

Puzzled, Ploop stopped, half turned, and made for another of the strangers. This one was younger than the rest, thought Ploop. Perhaps——

But, no. Like Jake, he took a step backwards. Fear showed in his eyes. He drew the tube at his waist and eyed Jake questioningly.

"Yes, son. I guess you'd better," said Jake.

Ploop took another step and then the blast hit him. He felt it spread all over his body; felt new life surge into every atom of his being. He was being fed at last!

—RON PRITCHETT

PEACE ON EARTH

by Paul Jents

“ . . . Five . . . Four . . . Three . . . Two . . . One . . . Blast off . . . Blast off . . . Blast—”

The controller's voice crackled and faded as the surge of power built up to full thrust, twisting the space-craft idly, like a pencil in a giant's fingers.

Even in his half-conscious state the Major felt the familiar sense of launch nausea. Carefully he steadied the pointer of his sedation pack two further degrees towards black-out level. He relaxed as his discomfort faded into the background.

He glanced round his squadron. They all seemed in good shape and only two had fully blacked-out. He noted their names. They would not accompany the mission. Even though no orders had been given to the contrary, a man who chose complete voluntary sedation at the moment of launching was not worthy of being selected as a Pathfinder.

Most of his men were watching the receding surface of the earth on the tele-screen—about two hundred miles up, he guessed, with booster rockets still firing. Just at that second the Major felt a sudden lightening of the craft, hearing the harsh hiss of the retro-rockets as first-stage burn-out occurred.

They would reach escape-velocity soon, he thought. He adjusted the straps of his hammock, noting how the exaggerated movement of his arms gave a foretaste of weightlessness—zero G. Hammocks — strange how the simple adaptation of an old-time seamen's hammock had proved by far the most comfortable space-couch. How many voyagers, remote in time and distance, had swung in similar hammocks, journeying towards strange seas of discovery. Yet none had been so strange as this—not in all history. At last the years of training would pay off, at last.

Turning to speak to his sergeant he moved too quickly

and his hammock ballooned lazily upward. Quite instinctively his body compensated with a correcting movement, regaining equilibrium.

"Just like flight simulation, back at base," he grinned. "Sneeze and you bounce off the ceiling!"

The sergeant nodded, cautiously. "I was thinking just the same thing, sir," he replied into his mike. "I feel as if I'd done this all before—I know exactly what's coming. That flight school mock-up was certainly the goods. Going well, isn't it, sir?"

"I only heard of two aborts so far, and we're more than half-way up the list. There'll be quite a party up there at that rate. We've—"

The attention gong sounded in his ear-phones.

"Now hear this. Space-bird 1,539, hear this. This is the controller speaking. We are now four hundred miles from earth. The sustainer engine will shortly cut out, after which we shall programme into roll. All systems are functioning normally.

"You will have noticed the first effects of zero G. These symptoms will shortly increase to the point of discomfort. You will therefore undergo compulsory sedation until we are in orbit forty miles moonward. You will then be alerted to receive your orders. Compulsory sedation will proceed . . . Now."

Blackness swallowed all.

The Major came to immediate consciousness with the audible "click" which always accompanied a return from sedation. There was no drowsy awakening state; he was immediately fully aware of his surroundings. At once he looked at the tele-screen.

Reveille sounded, and then the face of the controller appeared, heralding an important announcement. The screen became blank and then crystallized into the chubby, smiling features of the General. As always he looked exactly like one of his caricatures, half schoolboy, half father-figure. He smiled at his audience and spoke.

"Well, lads, here we are in orbit about forty miles from the moon, and just as cosy as if we were in our barracks at home. Maybe a bit more cosy than that—the last few

months have been a bit tough for most of us. But now we hit the jackpot, boys.

"You don't need me to tell you what to do. After four years of training you know it backwards—forwards as well, I hope.

"Things have gone pretty well, so far. There's about eleven thousand of us up here, and we're all going to occupy the moon together. You'll make nothing of that—it won't be half as tough as the training courses back home.

"By the way, the enemy hasn't the least idea of what we're doing. In fact they announced a little while ago that they hoped to land their first astronaut on the moon sometime next year. There's a laugh for you, lads—won't he find a reception party to welcome him!" He paused.

"Right—I'll be off now, and let you get on with it. The Pathfinders go in first, of course, while the rest of us orbit. You'll get all your briefing from your individual commanders. So long then, boys. See you on the moon."

Then came the famous thumbs-up sign, the wink, and the screen came blank.

The Orderly Sergeant's voice came over his ear-phones. "Pathfinder leader to control room, fifteen minutes. Pathfinder—"

The Major pressed his "acknowledge" key, and the voice ceased. Rather stiffly he swung himself from his hammock and made his way to the wash-room. Subconsciously he noted that artificial gravitation was nearly perfect—only the water in the bowl was a few degrees off true.

Fifteen minutes later he was announced at the controller's cabin. He saluted.

"Pleasant trip, Major?" The controller looked at him with keen, quick eyes. "Sorry we had to sedate you with the rest—we'd have liked to have had you with us, but you needed all the sleep you could get. How are you: fit?"

Without waiting for an answer the controller continued. "Now—what do you make of this?" He passed a photograph to the Major, who studied it closely.

"Close-up of one of the plains on the reverse face of the moon, of course." He peered. "Detail not very good. These look like straight lines—artificial. Not roads?"

"No, roads couldn't be seen from this height, Major.

To tell you the truth, we're pretty puzzled too. It could be an air-strip, runways. Partially ruined, of course."

"Shows up pretty clearly," commented the Major.

"No atmosphere, of course, or precious little. Anyway, whatever it is, that's the ideal place for you to land. Not a crater for miles. Suit you?"

"Fair enough. We can't miss that spot, and you can't miss us when we give you the all-clear."

"Right, Major. The tender rocket will be alongside the air-lock in two hours time." He stretched out his hand. "Good luck. I tell you—if I was ten years younger you wouldn't be doing this job. First man on the moon—you lucky devil!"

Exactly four hours later the tender rocket touched down to a soft landing. The forward escape-hatch opened and the Major stepped out upon the surface of the moon, and into history.

His first sensation was a startling feeling of familiarity. He could have been back at the landing simulation base on earth. The same white-hot sun glared from an inky sky. The multi-coloured stars were plainly visible, together with the green globe of the world on the furthest horizon.

As he had expected, he stood upon a thick layer of dust. Adjusting his astro-suit for full gravitation, he scraped at it with the toe of his boot, easily revealing the hard surface beneath. He examined it curiously—concrete? All that could be looked into later.

He transmitted his first "success" signal to the spacecraft. Within ninety seconds the message had reached earth. Six minutes later every monitoring station throughout the world received a communiqué under the direct seal of the President. It began:

"Today is a turning-point in the history of the world. This day a landing has been made upon the moon. But this is only the beginning.

"An armada of our forces, the most powerfully equipped army in history, is now in orbit around the moon and will shortly occupy it. From this day onward the moon becomes part of our empire.

"Long ago we could have reached the moon and landed our astronauts upon it. But we have held back until now,

to occupy it in force and defend it for all time. This is the ultimate deterrent, the invincible weapon. . . ."

The message ended:

"With this landing the world becomes one, and it is our destiny to rule it. There can be no more wars. All the nations shall dwell together under our wise government. Any who break our peace shall be utterly destroyed.

"This day begins the golden age, which shall last for all time."

Before signalling the first wave of space-craft to land, the Pathfinders began to explore the immediate terrain. There was plenty of time in hand—three-hundred hours of blinding sunshine before the long lunar night. Some distance away, on the edge of the near horizon, rose a regularly shaped tower or pillar. This had to be investigated.

Switching off gravitation, the Major and his squadron bounded towards it, twenty feet at a stride. As he approached, he saw that it was a partially ruined monument, supporting an inscribed metal plaque. Most of it had fallen away, but the last few lines of characters were still sharp and clear in the almost complete absence of atmosphere.

Working with ludicrous, weightless ease, the tele-camera team set up their equipment. The strangely-lettered inscription was transmitted back to the space-ship and from thence to earth. There it was fed into the instantaneous decoder.

The Pathfinders now journeyed farther over the plain, towards the distant craters. Curiously they looked down at the dry, white calcinations which snapped under their feet.

On earth the decoded transcription began to stutter from the machine. The message ended:

". . . our destiny to govern the earth, and all the nations must obey our laws. This age of power and peace shall last for ever . . ." There the inscription broke off.

The Major had travelled some miles before he realised what the brittle calcinations were, over which he walked.

Bones.

—PAUL JENTS

Mr Bevan, whom we consider one of our best "finds", continues to show his amazing versatility with this story of a primitive community adapting to meet the threat of extinction.

DETERRENT

by Alistair Bevan

Spears were sacred to the Valley Folk. The spears of their warriors kept danger at bay, and the great palisades of spikes with which they ringed their villages gave them security at night. The sun woke their crops with hot spears, so the weapon had become a symbol of fertility. And when storms flickered in the surrounding hills the people were glad because the Gods were striking evil-doers with their own bright weapons.

The first news of the great invasion came unspectacularly. Some peasants, tending outlying crops, came to the Council of Elders with an odd story. They claimed they had been watched by a strange group of armed and mounted men. The warriors had made no aggressive move, and faced with the hoes and stakes of the villagers had ridden away. Three darktimes later though, when the sun was still bloody from his daily birth, a band of refugees staggered through the ramparts of the main village. They carried several injured men and one who was dead. The strangers had attacked, striking from a distance with arrows and heavy slings. With these last they were very skilful, as the corpse testified. The village had been sacked and crops were burning, staining the morning air with smoke.

The Council assembled in the Place of Voices, a cave under the foothills where lived the Gods of this folk who as yet had made no images. The stalactites crowded the crannies of the great place, awesome and cold. From the crystal spears fell drops of water that, echoing in the complex of passages beyond, made a lilting language that only seers could understand. Here the Tellers of the Word

were cast on the ground. They were the collection of sacred objects on whose disposition the fate of the tribe would rest. Ranna the Seer studied them as they had fallen, making from time to time the passes in the air that would disperse the fog of ignorance and enable him to see with truth. Round him the Elders waited, sitting on the floor of the cavern or leaning on their ceremonial spears of worked stone.

The Tellers were a strange collection. There was a little bone, polished with use; a glittering piece of quartz; several small stones painted with the motif of the spear, and a pebble, curiously translucent, picked up on the Gods knew what distant shore.

The stalactite voices chuckled, whispering suggestions half heard and less than half understood. The Tellers lay in their pattern, containing within themselves all mysteries. Ranna rocked on his heels to aid his concentration. He felt heavy with responsibility as he waited for his duty to become clear. At length there was no doubt, and he began to speak.

The Tellers had fallen very oddly. The principal objects lay in a ragged line that could only represent a spear. The tip of the spear was marked by the quartz. Around it the lesser pebbles had made a rough semicircle. That was an image of security, a womb or a cave. A bright spear, then, would be found in a cave. It would be greater than other weapons, and with its aid the Valley Folk would drive away their attackers.

Ranna stopped speaking, and the stalactites seemed to murmur approvingly. The Elders looked grave. There were no caves except the one in which they stood. Bowing, they backed from the xylophone presence of the Gods.

The scouting party left the village that evening, with many backward looks and a great deal of inner quaking. The group consisted of eight warriors and was led by Soar the Hunter, the most redoubtable fighter in the Valley. They worked their way silently up into the hills. The Valley was cordoned, but they were challenged only once. The breath that the sentry took before he called for help was his last. The party camped for the night in a shallow

gully between two little peaks. Several times before morning the thunder rolled close over their heads but they made the ritual Stack of Spears and when the run rose again they were unharmed. They looked down on a sight that few Valley Folk had seen before.

The Valley stretched beneath their feet, a shallow bowl striped with the yellow and green of growing crops, hazy with the smoke of many cooking fires. Other fires, more ominous, burned at points along its rim. These marked the camps of the besiegers. One was quite close to Soar and his men, and as the light became brighter they heard rough shouts, the rattle of spears and the sounds of horses. When they saw a body of men emerge from the camp and move toward their hideout they fled, crossing the ridge and coming by evening to the seemingly endless plain beyond the hills.

There they wandered for many weeks, invariably sore-footed, usually hungry. There were no cattle, and they were reduced to snaring the wild dogs that roamed in packs almost everywhere outside the Valley. They saw much that disturbed them. Villages similar to their own had been destroyed, and now held nothing but blackened earth, bones and the skeletons of huts. There were many enemy camps, lusty, brawling and full of armed men. The invaders seemed to be the van of a great nomadic population that destroyed the land it crossed like a locust swarm. Where the horde had come from, or why, were questions beyond Soar and his men. All they knew was that in a cave or dark place they would find a great spear that would somehow save their people. They searched for that place.

Months passed, and the growing coldness of mornings and evenings warned them of the approach of winter. They turned back, miserable and unsuccessful. There came a morning when they once again stood on the peak of a hill and looked down into their own Valley.

It seemed much the same, except that more areas of cultivated land were blackened. The enemy camps though had been moved from the heights closer to the resisting villages. Obviously the fighting continued, but the end was in sight. Soar shuddered and led his men forward, search-

ing for a hiding place they could use until nightfall, when they could work through the enemy lines.

He found the cave by accident. A mat of vegetation gave suddenly beneath his feet and Soar plunged downward with a shout. His outstretched spear saved him, coming down across the tangle of branches and spreading his weight over a greater area. Soar hung in space, feet treading air, supported by the spear haft under his chest. After a few moments he wriggled cautiously to firm ground and stood up on the edge of the pit that had opened to swallow him. He looked at his companions and saw one expression on all their faces. Perhaps at long last this was the cave of the prophecy.

They set to work carefully to remove the brushwood from the opening. When its mouth was clear the shaft was an impressive sight. It was twenty feet or more across, and driven vertically to an unknown depth inside the hill. Soar looked doubtfully into the darkness. The hole did not seem entirely natural. Its edges had been worked in some manner he could not understand. The hunter cast about for a stone, leaned out and dropped it into the depths.

The result was startling. The missile seemed to fall to the very middle of the earth, waking in its passage harsh echoes that multiplied themselves until the little band scattered in terror. After a time the God-voices ceased to shout from the ground, and Soar crept back. Another stone produced the same effect, and another. No Gods emerged to challenge the intruders, and Soar formed a great resolve. Torches of brushwood were made, and lit from the container of smouldering moss they had carried with them from their morning camp. Soar and two of the boldest of his men climbed cautiously over the lip of the pit and began to descend.

The climb was not difficult. There were ledges and oddly worked footholds in the side of the shaft, and by their aid Soar descended a great distance. He came at length to a broader platform on which he rested until his companions caught up. They were muttering with fear, and when he looked up the mouth of tunnel was like a distant bright star. Soar, quaking inwardly, growled at his

hunters and waved his torch to make it flare, ordering them to do the same. Then they knelt and held the brands out over the edge of the shelf.

What they saw seemed at first to stop their hearts ; then Soar at least was filled with a joy that made him shout aloud, careless of the echoes that roared back from the pit. Almost level with their eyes was the needle-sharp tip of the biggest spear the hunters had ever seen. The dully shining blade vanished in the gloom that still stretched beneath their feet.

The news of the discovery, taken to the surface, soon brought the rest of the band down to the ledge, for their respect for Ranna was at least as great as their fear of subterranean Gods. They made the rest of the descent together. It took them an hour of cautious testing and probing for footholds, and all the time the great bulk of the Spear loomed at their backs. When they arrived at the bottom of the pit Soar set them to collecting materials for a fire. A little wood had fallen into the shaft from time to time, scarcely enough for their purpose ; but there were many strange combustible objects littered around and with these they soon had a good blaze going. It flickered oddly on the sides of the great Spear that stretched above them. Soar approached the God-thing with a mixture of reverence and curiosity.

The material from which it was made intrigued him. It was hard, it glinted dully like nothing he had ever seen before and it rang hollowly when struck. Soar tapped it experimentally several times, then scraped at it with his spear-point. The brightness was increased. Emboldened, he drew back his spear and struck hard. A shock flew up his arm and the stone point of the weapon shattered, leaving him with a useless shaft. Yet the strange material was hardly marked. Soar broke in turn all the spears of all his followers without making any impression at all. Eventually one of the hunters brought him a long rod of the same magic substance, and with its aid he managed to prize several sections from the base of the Spear.

He held them in his hands and turned them about. Their weight and hardness were fascinating. He was sure now that he had discovered the answer to the Tribe's

problems. His mind reeled at the number of knives, lances and arrow-tips that could be made from the body of the Great Spear. Yet how could such a substance be worked, if stone was useless against it?

The hunter squatted on his heels, frowning. By and by a thought occurred to him and he took up one of the rods again. He had seen men split boulders into building stones by the alternate use of water and fire. Perhaps the new material could also be overcome by the bright element. He stirred the fire into a blaze, and thrust the tip of the rod into it. When he withdrew it he saw with a dulled sense of wonder that it had taken the fire into itself, and glowed brightly like another torch. When it cooled it was blackened but otherwise unharmed, and its brightness could be restored by rubbing it on the rock wall of the shaft. Soar reheated his toy, laid it on the ground and hammered vigorously with the remains of a spearpoint to see if the new substance could be chipped while hot. It would not split, but something else happened. It flattened visibly under the blows. What had been harder than the mountains was now as malleable as stiff mud. Soar set to work in earnest.

He toiled for some hours, oblivious of hunger, thirst, the heat of the fire or the cursing of his followers as they scurried about in an endless search for fuel. After he had moulded the rod to the shape he required he scoured it with sand until its brightness was restored. When he held it up his companions gasped with wonder. He had fashioned a great spearblade, half the width of a man's body. It was sharp edged and needle pointed. Soar studied the weapon for some time, turning it about to make the fire-light flash on it. Then he laid his hand on the rock, placed the point of the spear on his palm and pressed experimentally. He felt pain, and saw a deep wound that filled instantly with blood. He shouted, and held up his hand to let the others see the brightness run down his arm. He had mastered the trick that would save his people.

Soar's men set to work again, more willingly this time. They prized more bright flesh from the monster, collected the strange rods into bundles that they slung across their backs. One of the hunters had discovered a tunnel lead-

ing away from the bottom of the pit, and into this Soar marched unhesitatingly. He had no doubt that they would gain the open air through a vent as well concealed as the one into which he had almost fallen. With luck they would be inside the enemy's lines as well. He hurried along the smooth shaft, anxious to bring back more of the Valley Folk to the strange mine that would save their lives.

They left the great missile to brood in darkness. They had not touched the complex machinery beneath the sheathing. It was useless to them, and meant nothing; and even had they been able to read the characters still visible on the towering shell, the words "United States Navy" would have meant even less.

ALISTAIR BEVAN

This story may not be science-fiction in the accepted sense of the word but it is in our view a triumph of empathetic fiction. We have been trying to get the first British rights in it for a year now—we think you will agree that it was worth waiting for.

A PLEASURE SHARED

by Brian W. Aldiss

At seven thirty I rose and went over to the window and drew back the curtains. Outside lay another wintry London day—not nice.

Miss Colgrave was still in the chair where I had left her. I pulled her skirt down. Female flesh looks very unappetising before breakfast. I went through into the kitchen and made myself a cup of tea and poached an egg on the gas ring. While I did so I smoked a cigarette. I always enjoy a cigarette first thing in the morning.

I ate my breakfast in the bedroom, watching Miss Colgrave closely as I did so. At one point I rose to adjust the scarf round her neck, which looked unsightly. Miss Colgrave had not been a very respectable woman ; she had paid the price of sin. But it would be a nuisance disposing of her.

First I would have to wrap her in a blanket, as I had done with Miss Robbins. This was also a nuisance, since I was rather short of blankets, and the worst of the winter was yet to come. I thought what a pity it was that the disposal of useless females like Miss Colgrave and Miss Robbins could not be made legal. After all, they were a blot on the community with their dirty habits.

For some while I thought about the blanket, enjoying another smoke as I did so. Then I decided I would go for a walk before doing anything. Miss Colgrave would not run away.

I went out on to the landing, locked my flat door, and proceeded downstairs. On the landing of the first floor, I met Mrs. Meacher, dressed to go out. Mrs. Meacher was a very proper little woman, and she liked me. Although she was young, I must say she was not as nosey as some.

"Good morning, Mr. Cream," she said. "Not a very nice morning, is it?"

"At least it's not raining, Mrs. Meacher."

"No, well there is that to be thankful for. And how's the sciatica this morning?"

I had sprained my back carrying Miss Robbins down to the coal cellar, and it had bothered me.

"Not too troublesome this morning, Mrs. Meacher. We all have our crosses to bear, as Father used to say. And how's your rheumatism?"

"These stairs don't do it any good you know. I lay awake with it half the night. Still we mustn't grumble, must we?"

"Grumbling doesn't do any good does it?"

"You didn't sleep too well, either, did you, Mr. Cream? I mean I heard you walking about in the early part of the night, and several bumps. I got quite worried."

Mrs. Meacher was a very respectable young widow, but all women are curious. They do not keep themselves to themselves as men do. It is a fault that ought to be eradicated. However, I was very polite as usual; I explained I had been exercising my sciatica. Something made me add, "You don't have a spare blanket, Mrs. Meacher, that you could lend me?"

She looked a bit doubtful, and fiddled with her hat in the irritating way some women have.

"I might have one in the bottom of my wardrobe," she said. "I could spare you that. I'm in a bit of a hurry now. Perhaps you'd care to come in this afternoon for it. We could have a cup of tea together, if you like."

"That would be nice, Mrs. Meacher."

"Yes, it would. I believe in people minding their own business, but it's nice to be neighbourly, isn't it, when your neighbours are the right sort."

"Those are my sentiments, Mrs. Meacher."

She adjusted her hat. "Half past four, then. I *respect* a

man who doesn't drink, Mr. Cream—not like that awful Mr. Lawrence just moved in on the ground floor.”

“Public houses are the inventions of the devil, Mrs. Meacher. Mother told me that, and I’ve never forgotten it. There’s a lot of truth in it.”

She went downstairs, and I followed. I thought perhaps it would be a nice idea to ask her to have a cup of tea with me one afternoon—when I had my room clear, of course.

Mrs. Meacher had hustled out of the front door before I got down into the dark hall. You could only see down there when the electric light was on. The bulb had fused, and our landlord had failed to replace it. He was a hard man who cared only about money—just the kind of man I despise.

“Cream!”

A door opened, and Lawrence appeared. He was a little fat man who walked about in slippers and shirt sleeves. I never let anybody see me without my jacket on. Careless in dress, careless in morals.

“Good morning, Mr. Lawrence,” I said, trying to make him keep his distance.

“Here, Cream, I want a word with you. That was Flossie Meacher just went out wasn’t it?”

“No other women live in this establishment to my knowledge.”

“What about that pusher you had up in your room last night? I saw yer!”

To be accused thus of having women up in my room—as if I were some common little seducer!—by this vulgarian made me very angry. But he continued, “Come in my room a moment. There’s a thing or two you can help me on.”

“I am a busy man, Mr. Lawrence.”

“Not too busy to help a chap, I hope. I know you’re as thick as thieves with Flossie Meacher. You wouldn’t want me to tell her about the pushers you have up in your room, would you?”

In this there was some truth. Though I had no great liking for Mrs. Meacher, I did not wish to be lowered in

her estimation. Making the best of a bad job, I stepped into Lawrence's untidy room.

The room contained an unmade bed, chairs, a table covered with beer and milk bottles, a pile of dirty clothes on the floor, and precious little else. Obviously the man lived a bohemian way of life I found distasteful; my parents had always brought me up to be tidy in all I did.

Lawrence offered me a cigarette.

"I'll smoke one of my own, thank you," I said. I am a great believer in avoiding unnecessary germs. We both lit up—I condescended to share his match—and he said "Flossie Meacher don't think much of me, does she?"

"I have no idea of her opinions on the subject."

"Oh yes, you have! I heard her telling you on the landing I was a dirty bastard. I stood here with my door ajar and heard every word you two said."

"Mrs. Meacher would not use foul language, Mr. Lawrence."

"Come off it, mate. Who do you think you are?"

Inspiration came to me at this point; I can think very quickly on occasions. It occurred to me that there would probably be other emergencies after Miss Colgrave, of a similar nature, and here I could turn this meeting to my future advantage.

"I merely came down, Mr. Lawrence, to ask you if you could lend me a blanket. The nights are growing chilly."

This disconcerted him. He looked very silly with his mouth open. I never open mine more than I can help, although my teeth are a good deal more attractive than his.

"I might have a spare blanket," he said at last. "But I was going to ask you about Flossie Meacher."

"I will be pleased to tell you what I know in exchange for a blanket."

"So that's the way it is! You're a funny cove, Cream, and no mistake . . . Well then, tell me this: is her husband, Old Tom Meacher, dead?"

"I understand her husband passed away before she came to live in Institute Place."

"Did he now? Poor old Tom! How did he peg out?"

"Mrs. Meacher gave me to understand that her husband passed away due to pneumonia."

"I see. I used to know old Tom Meacher. He used to have the occasional pint with me when I was working at Walthamstow. He was a brickie, same as me."

I thought his coarse disgusting hands looked like a bricklayer's. I signified I was ready to receive the blanket and go.

"Not so fast. Here, sit down and have a beer with me, like a civilised man."

"Thank you, but to my knowledge civilised men don't touch beer. Certainly I never drink it."

"You're a real snob, mate, aren't you?"

"Not at all. I will speak to anyone in any walk of life. I just have standards, that's all."

"Standards . . . Ah well." He shrugged his shoulders and went on. "Tell me some more about Flossie. She's a proper martinet, isn't she?"

"She observes the decencies, if that's what you mean."

"Comes to the same thing. People who observe the decencies never got any time for anything else. I know she drove old Tom to drink, and then spent her life trying to keep him off it."

"Mr. Lawrence, Mrs. Meacher's private life is entirely her own affair."

"Ah, but it's not, you know. You see, I'm scheming to marry Flossie Meacher."

Other people's lives can be so sordid that I really don't care to hear about them. But this man Lawrence's announcement surprised me to such an extent that I consented to sit by his table and listen while he told me a rambling tale. Several times I lost the thread of what he was saying, for it really was not particularly interesting.

He opened a bottle of beer for himself, as if he could not think without the nauseating stuff.

"I daresay you're wondering, Cream, why I should want to marry a woman I know is a young battleaxe, eh? It's a funny story, really, I suppose. The years go by and we don't get no different . . . I'm the sort of man who *needs* a harsh woman, Cream. I've always been the same . . ."

I had been more fortunate. I had had a harsh mother to show me what the world was really like. That might have been the difference between this man and me; you could see even in the way we dressed which of us had had proper discipline as a child. I could still recall vividly the agony of having Mother clean my nails with the sharp file that dug down into the quick; in fact I think of it most times I bite my nails, even today.

"I was the youngest of seven kids, Cream. My parents were as kind as could be—never hurt a fly—and my brothers and sisters were kind too. We lived in a place out Dagenham way. Funny thing about their kindness—they never told me what to do, never told me a thing. You won't believe this, but I grew up in a proper maze, really lost, although there was lots of people all crowded round me all the time . . ."

(Oh, I believe it all right, Mr. Lawrence, because you obviously are lost now. It just shows how breeding will tell. I was my parents' only child. I had their attention all the time, and as a result I have grown up neat and normal and sensible. Although Mother and Father passed away years ago, I often have the feeling they still watch over me. Well, I don't have to reproach myself for anything. I've grown up as they would wish. In fact I think I may say I'm stronger and just a little more respectable than they were. That was almost the last thing I said to Miss Colgrave, I remember, when I finally got her down into the chair. Disgraceful the way their bowel muscles lose control in those last moments. Father was so particular about such things; many's the whipping he gave me for wetting my bed; I know he would understand how I felt about Miss Colgrave.)

"It was only when I was twelve anyone took any proper notice of me. Funny how it comes back to you, ain't it? I can see the broken railings round our back yard now . . . It was when I was twelve I had my first girl friend. Sally, her name was, Sally Beeves. She was so pretty, she was. God, I can see her now! She had a little sister, Peggy. That pair made a dead set at me, Cream. They used to get me in the attic over the old garage her father ran. It'd turn your blood cold, Cream, if I told you all the things those

girls did to me! Talk about torture. Why, one day, Sally got some rubber tubing . . ."

Disgusting men like Lawrence can never talk about anything but women. If I took him upstairs and showed him Miss Colgrave, he might think a deal less of their breed.

And now he was telling me horrible things I did not want to hear. I could not keep my own thoughts separate from them. For a moment I thought in my anger how good it would be if the world were rid of Lawrence. But that was not my job; I had enough work on my hands. Besides, being a fastidious man, I heartily dislike scuffles, and Lawrence was probably stronger than me. When selecting my women, I always make sure they are physically small and on the weak side, so that we avoid any unseemly struggles. Besides, I have my heart to think of.

"Yet despite all she did to me, I loved Sally Beeves. You see, she was the first person ever to take real notice of me. The general family kindness wasn't enough. Honest, you may laugh, but I preferred Sally's cruelty. And sometimes when she made me cry, she'd kiss me, and then I'd swear to myself I'd marry her when I grew up . . ."

Marriage. I might have known Lawrence's tedious tale would get round to *that*. Frankly, marriage is a subject I prefer to avoid. After Mother's death I foolishly married that woman Emily; if she had been alive to guide me I am sure I should never have done so.

Yet on the surface Emily seemed respectable enough. She was older than me and had some money of her own. She insisted we went for our honeymoon to Boulogne, which rather put me out, since I dislike travelling abroad where people cannot speak English. We crossed the Channel on the night ferry. We had hardly got into our cabin before she started making advances in a very obvious way I could not ignore.

I was more shocked and disappointed with Emily than I can say. On some pretext or other I got her up onto the boat deck and pushed her over the rail. It was easy and then I felt better.

Of course, later I felt sorry. I remember I suffered from one of my periodic bouts of diarrhoea. But her parents

were so sympathetic when they heard of the accident, that I soon got over it.

"As things turned out, Dad's business went bust, and we moved, so I never saw Sally again. And somehow after that, well, ordinary girls didn't have the same appeal. I have found other girls to treat me rough, but not in the same way as dear old Sally Beeves. Funny, isn't it? I mean I sometimes think I actually *prefer* being unhappy.

"Has it ever struck you, Cream, that we never really know ourselves, never mind other people?"

His life was a mess. Mine was so neat and self-contained. I had nothing in common with him, nothing at all. He was on his second bottle of beer already. Suddenly I stopped biting my nails and said, "About that blanket, Mr. Lawrence . . ."

He said, "I was getting round to asking you about Flossie upstairs. Don't you reckon she'd be the type for me, strict and hard? How old would you say she was?"

"I have never thought to enquire."

"Make a guess, man."

"About forty."

"Ah. Thirty-eight or nine, I'd have said. And I'm forty-nine, so that wouldn't be so bad. Mind you, I like comforts with my miseries—does she strike you as having money, Cream?"

"She has her own furniture."

"Ah. Well old Meacher made a lot of money out of building in the fifties, before he died. Left her quite a tidy sum. I did hear ten thousand pounds mentioned. So she must be hanging on to it tight to be living in a dump like this."

"Number Fourteen was perfectly respectable till you came here, Mr. Lawrence."

"Don't give me that! Have you ever been and had a sniff down the cellar? No, I don't suppose you have. It wouldn't be smart enough for the likes of you. It stinks as if they stored dead 'uns as well as lumber down there. Anyhow, the question is, has anyone else got his eye on our Flossie? And do you think she'd have me?"

"Since you force me to be honest, I don't think she'd even consider you, Mr. Lawrence."

"Then maybe you've got a surprise coming, *Mister Cream*. Nothing wrong with me when I'm sober . . . Anyhow, what I want you to do is put in a good word for me. How about it?"

"I can't promise anything."

"Go on, I'll give you a blanket. Two blankets."

If the man wished to be foolish, I saw no reason why I should discourage him. I said I would do what I could. Eventually I accepted two very poor blankets from him and proceeded upstairs with them.

For an awful moment, I can't say why, I thought it was my mother in the chair. I had completely forgotten Miss Colgrave as I came in the door. This made me feel very bad, and I decided to go out for a coffee.

It seems a pity that people who do all they can to deserve to be happy should not be happy all the time.

I sat in a small cafe where I sometimes go, drinking a coffee. I had already decided not to work that day. They did not appreciate my efforts at the warehouse. I would turn up on the next day, and if they made trouble I should simply leave. Money was rather a worry; I hardly had enough for cigarettes. With some surprise I thought over what Lawrence had said about Mrs. Meacher having ten thousand pounds.

A girl came in and sat at the next table to me. She was about my type, so I got talking to her. With these girls, you don't have to say much and they run on and on; they don't mind if you don't listen to them. This one said she was working at a nearby draper's and that she did photographic modelling in her spare time.

Ha ha, my girl, I thought, I know your sort. I hate photography and all art, because they all lead to the same thing. If I had my way, I'd burn all the picture galleries in the world. Then we might have less of all this immorality you read about. I've heard Father say that painters and authors were minions of the Devil, although he made an exception for some improving writers like Lloyd Douglas and Conan Doyle.

When I found out from this girl that she came to the cafe at the same time every day, I knew I could get in touch with her when I wished. I told her I was a director

of a big blanket-manufacturing firm in the Midlands, and she agreed to pose naked for me if I required it. Then I left the cafe, after bidding her good morning.

On the occasions when I have disposal troubles on my mind, I often take long rambles round London. This I did now, although it was rather chilly. My stomach was a little upset, so that I was forced to visit various gentlemen's lavatories on my route. When I read some of the things written in the cubicles, they made me very ashamed and excited.

I watched some old buildings being pulled down. Demolition work always fascinates me, but my pleasure was spoilt by the racial people labouring on the site. These Jamaicans and other people should be sent back to Africa where they belong; there must be plenty of room for them there. Not that I believe in the colour bar. It's just that there isn't room for them here. I shouldn't want a daughter of mine to marry anybody at all racial.

Being able to amuse myself has always been one of my virtues. I'm never lonely, and I don't depend on other people. Father used to hate me playing with other boys; he said they might teach me dirty language. When I write filthy things on cubicle walls, it's always to make other boys ashamed. So when I saw by a jeweller's clock that it was half past four, I remembered I was invited to have tea with Mrs. Meacher, and I directed my footsteps back towards Number Fourteen, Institution Place.

In the hall it was very dark. A slight smell drifted up from the cellar, dampish, mouldy, not unpleasant. Lawrence's door was ajar, but by the silence there I guessed he was out. As I began to ascend the stairs, a voice from above called my name. It was Mrs. Meacher.

When I reached her landing, I observed she was looking distraught.

"I am afraid I am a little late for our tea party, Mrs. Meacher," I said politely.

"You'll have to prepare yourself for a shock, Mr. Cream. Something awful has happened.."

I dislike awful things happening. They are apt to hap-

pen where women are. I said, "I'm afraid I have to go out in a minute, Mrs. Meacher."

She became very wild.

"You can't go out. You can't leave me. Come in here, please! It's that Mr. Lawrence. He's dead!"

In her excitement, she had taken hold of my arm and half dragged me into her room.

The place was in a disgraceful state. I saw at once that it was well furnished, even down to having a nice carpet on the floor, and lampshades and pictures and things. But a table and an armchair had been overturned. A tray with a cup and saucer and such lay on the carpet, with lump sugar spilling out in a curve. Some of these lumps were red, sucking up the blood that lay in pools or splashes here and there.

The cause of the blood lay in one corner under the window, bent double with his head hanging over a small work table. It was Lawrence.

Though his face was turned away from me, I recognised him by the pattern of his shirt, and the width of his fat back. The shirt was disfigured with blood. A pair of scissors stuck out of it. I saw at once that these scissors were the weapon used, and congratulated myself on the fact that the scarf I employed during my upsets with Miss Colgrave, Miss Robbins and the others, was so much less messy.

I sat down on an upright chair.

"Some water, please, Mrs. Meacher. I feel quite faint at the sight of blood. You shouldn't have brought me in here."

She fetched me the water. As I was drinking it, she began to talk.

"It wasn't deliberate, really it wasn't. I'm scared of men, I'm scared of men like that! He's a boozier, just like my husband was—just the same. You never know what they'll want next. But I never meant to kill him. I got so scared, you see. I could smell the drink on him. He scared me down in the dark hall, and then he followed me up here. I was scared out of my wits, really I was—but it wasn't deliberate."

"I feel better for that," I said, putting the glass down.

It was a nice clean glass with a leaf pattern cut in it. "You'd better tell me what happened, Mrs. Meacher."

She seemed to make an effort to calm herself, and sat down facing me so that she could not see Lawrence and the scissors.

"There's nothing much to tell, not really. Like I say, he followed me upstairs. He'd been drinking. I know the smell of beer all right, and you could tell by the way he acted. I couldn't get this door shut in time. I had to let him in, he was so insistent. Oh, I got all scared. And then he got down on his knees and—and he—oh, he asked me to *marry* him."

"So you stabbed him with the scissors?"

"I lost my head. I kicked him and told him to get up. He begged me to kick him again. He seemed to get all excited. When he grabbed my skirt, I knew what he was up to. Drunken, filthy brute! My sewing things were left out on the table. Without realising what I was doing, I took hold of my big pair of scissors and drove them into his back as he knelt there."

I noticed with distaste that there were a few splashes of blood on her blouse and skirt.

Her eyes were wide as she added in a whisper, "He took such a long time to die, Mr. Cream. I thought he would never have done with blundering and falling round the room. I ran out until I heard he was quite still."

"He didn't actually attack you, Mrs. Meacher?"

"I've told you what he did. He grabbed my skirt. I felt his knuckles on my stockings!"

"He was touching your skirt in the process of proposing matrimony, I take it."

"Mr. Cream, he was *drunk*!"

I stood up.

"You realise I must report this to the police at once," I said. "I can't go getting myself mixed up in murder."

She stood up too. She was shorter than me. Her eyes went very narrow.

"When he was still—moving about, I ran up to your room to see if you were in, to get you to come and help me. I knocked and ran straight in, Mr. Cream. I saw that dead woman in that chair. You'd better *not* go to the

police, Mr. Cream! You'd better stay and help me get rid of this body, or someone's going to hear about that dead woman in that chair."

With irritation, I recalled that although I had locked my door when I first left my room that morning, I had forgotten to do so later, after leaving Lawrence's blankets in there, owing to a temporary depression of spirits. It just shows you can't be too careful. I recalled the way Father used to tease Mother by saying that a woman would always find your secrets out.

"Well, what do you say to that?" Mrs. Meacher asked.

"Naturally I will help you if I can."

"The body?"

"I will help you dispose of the body."

My stomach began to rumble the way it sometimes does in times of crisis.

"Excuse me, please," I said, beginning to leave the room.

She followed me up instantly, in a very pugnacious manner I did not like at all.

"Where are you going?"

"To the toilet, Mrs. Meacher," I said with dignity.

It was a disgrace that the whole house had only the one toilet on the ground floor. While there, I had a chance to think things over more calmly. Lawrence would not be the sort of man anyone would want to trace. Who was there to care if he lived or died—except our landlord, who would ask no questions as long as he got his rent? Mrs. Meacher could see to that.

Then we could have a little sort of double funeral. Both Miss Colgrave and Mr. Lawrence could go down into the cellar, behind all that useless wood and junk, to join Miss Robbins, and the Irish girl. It would be nice to have help with the weight down all those wretched stairs. A pleasure shared is a pleasure doubled, as Mother used to say every Sunday when we went to chapel.

Thinking along those lines while I juggled with the chain until the cistern flushed, I had an idea. What Lawrence had said about Mrs. Meacher's ten thousand pounds returned to my mind. It was a lot of money, and somehow I felt I deserved it.

She was a respectable woman—her reactions to Lawrence proved that. Besides if the worst came to the worst, she was smaller than me. Flossie. Flossie Meacher. Flossie—Cream.

As I proceeded back upstairs, I called out cheerfully, "I'm just going to get a blanket. Don't worry. Leave everything to me, Flossie!"

—BRIAN W. ALDISS

PRISONER

by Patricia Hocknell

He awoke, startled, arms and legs jerking up and outwards. His hand struck bars, wide, hard and firmly fixed. Had there been a sound? What had woken him? His heart pounded as he stared empty-eyed into nothingness. Black silken darkness clung coldly, yet towered above him, stretching out into eternity beyond the bars that confined him. He was lost and adrift on this river of night. The cold ate into him, gnawing at his bones, chilling his heart. His lower body lay in a pool of water, and he struggled to move, muscles straining until the sweat stood out on his face. Wild thrashing with his limbs produced some slight effect of movement, but to pull his body away from the icy pool which threatened to swamp him needed a greater strength than he was able to gather. His head could turn from side to side, but the neck muscles were so atrophied that he could raise it only slightly before falling back, exhausted and panting through parched lips. Thirst. To lie in water and be unable to drink. How did he come to be in this hell?

Desperately he tried to remember his crime: a crime of such enormity that he was condemned, a prisoner like this, unable to move, alone. Alone! Fear stabbed his heart. He was alone and forgotten in this deep insidious obscurity that swirled about him as he struggled for memory. Eyes strained into the darkness, ears tensed for a sound that did not come. Only the muffled pounding of his own frightened heart, the rasp of his own breath in his dry throat.

A sudden tearing pain in his belly. Nausea immersed him and he could feel his life draining away. Hands clutched at nothing. Cold. Cold feet strained against imprisoning bonds.

Where was he? Traitorous memory had deserted him. Had he been here so long that even he had forgotten himself? If he had forgotten, then who would remember? So quiet . . . was there anyone there to remember? The dark-

ness pressed around him, silent and still. He listened, hands clenched, arms bent on his chest. No sound broke the stillness of the night. There could never have been such a stillness before. Only nothingness remained. The world was lost, gone, dead. Only he was left, the last one, a helpless prisoner fated to stay here when all else was ended. Left in an eternity of emptiness.

What holocaust had robbed him of mind, of body, of all hope of freedom, leaving him without succour?

Pain filled his body, eating outwards from his belly, creeping through him until he could scarcely move even his weakened limbs. There was a slow laboured movement of arm muscles as he ineffectually wiped at the cold sweat on his face, but his hand would not respond and his blundering fingers, sharp-nailed, scratched an eye, and tears ran.

A sound escaped his throat, weak and strangled, yet in some hopeless way bringing hope. If he called there might be an answer, perhaps there was still someone on this deserted world. There must be, he couldn't be alone, not left to die in this empty coldness. He groped for the bars. They were thick and heavy, sneering at his puny strength. He shook them, and they stayed firm, unmoving. Nothing moved, except his mind, leaping, tripping, falling into inevitable conclusions.

Terror mounted. He didn't want to lose his grip on even this feeble flicker of life. He needed to live. He had to survive. He closed his eyes, squeezing them shut until the blackness changed to red and his ears sang. Hot tears scalded the lids, oozing under the lashes, dripping across his face, growing cold as they slid away from him.

Pain enveloped him, and he screamed, sobbing.

Now memory began to return. This had happened before, and again, before. This was his fate, to live these dying moments time and again. He screamed with all the strength left to him, struggling against his nemesis.

Sudden light flooded, shining whitely through the thick bars, and sound came, the noise of heavy movement. Relief flooded through him, weakening him completely with the knowledge that he was not alone. Then the tears creeping like droplets of oil, stopped, as paralysed with fear, he

watched the huge hands, fingers outstretched, clawlike, swooping towards him. Helpless, he gave himself to his fate, for there was no escape, and he was snatched away from the enclosing bars, the chill water, the coldness.

He was dry and warm, and soon the pain would be ended. His mouth closed over the nipple, and his tiny hands groped at the warm softness of his mother's breast. The world had returned.

—PATRICIA HOCKNELL

IN REASON'S EAR

by Pippin Graham

*"In Reason's ear they all rejoice
And utter forth a glorious voice
Forever singing as they shine ;
The hand that made us is Divine."*

Addison : *Ode to the Planets*

At Marble Arch John Wetherall awoke suddenly as his taxi stopped with a squeal of brakes and angry shouting began.

He rubbed his eyes and stared blurrily out of the window. There was the Cumberland Hotel. He must have slept all the way from the airport. Still dazed he settled back against the flaking leather of the taxi seat, deciding to doze on unless the pressure of the argument between his driver and the other man became too pressing to be ignored. Half reproaching himself for his lack of interest in his surroundings after five years away, he began to sleep again.

An unquiet thought crept in—he sat up suddenly. Good Lord, he thought, what's going on round here?

With the speed of a man who has spent five years leaping out of bed at night to kill snakes and chase off pilferers, he jumped up and shot the window down. At once he noticed the drab, battered façades of Oxford Street, peeling like the Grand Hotel, Budapest, ten years after World War II. The crowd surging and shouting on the pavements beside the cab looked like a combination of existentialist Paris after dark and closing time at the circus. About his stationary cab washed the traffic—battered cars, scraped red buses and decrepit lorries, coming from all directions at once, coughing, wheezing and halting, hooting and squealing with no regard for traffic regulations or, indeed, the virtues of give and take and tolerance on the roads.

And beside his own cab, standing by a garishly candy-

striped 1964 E-type Jaguar was a motley of young people, none a day over 18, arguing with the driver. Their spokesman was a tall girl, her blonde hair apparently hacked off by a vindictive army barber, her dress long and dun-coloured. She stood, lithe and menacing, with a small knife in her hand. Backing her up was another girl, dark and ugly, wearing the same orphanage dress and two long-haired boys, one in bright red and the other all in blue.

"You rammed us deliberate, mate," John heard the girl say with cold menace. "We saw you do it in the mirror. What's the matter—don't you fancy us, or something?"

"Come off it," the cab driver replied, obviously ill at ease. "You pulled up to avoid that fat bloke on the motor bike. I couldn't help going into you."

"No?" she said threateningly. "Well let's see you try."

Around them the traffic boomed and swerved threateningly.

John leaned further out of the window. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Oh—what's going on here," one of the boys jibed, cruelly imitating John's proconsular tones. "Down, dogs, and let me proceed. Come, Tony, my friend," he continued, turning to the other boy "let us harness ourselves to his coach and take him whither he commands."

John grew angry. "Would you kindly allow the driver to take me—" he began.

The other boy gave a hard laugh and stared at John with cool, challenging eyes. "To the nearest hostelry. The postilion has been struck by lightning," he said.

The first boy put one hand on his hip, leaned back slightly, pale eyes gleaming in his narrow face.

They're like two mad dogs, John thought, suddenly alarmed. "Look here—" he said.

Suddenly the boy stiffened, and his hand went to his pocket. Accustomed to the sight of violence, John sucked in his breath when he saw the gesture. And at that moment the driver slammed in the gears and the cab moved off.

After a moment John glanced backwards. The group stood by their car watching after them. Then the boy said something to the blonde girl, who shrugged. They climbed

into their car, did a U-turn into the seething traffic and drove back towards the Arch.

John rapped on the window of the cab. The driver half-turned. "What is it?" he said angrily.

"Did you get their number?" John asked.

"What for."

"So that one of us can report them."

The driver turned his full attention to the traffic. Then he swivelled his head round again. "Report them?" he said. "You must be joking. You're lucky that boy didn't jump in the cab and do for you." He swerved violently to avoid a dented lorry travelling straight towards them. "What put it into your head to interfere?"

"I thought you needed help," John said. The driver stopped his cab and turned round to face John. He gave him a look of ineffable scorn and detestation. Then he started up again abruptly. With his eyes on the road he said clearly, "You, mate, must be either drunk or barmy."

John's five years in a sweaty backwater of Africa had taught him to avoid snap judgments of other people's behaviour. He lit a cigarette and stared broodingly out at the shabby shops. The whole incident baffled him. To be threatened with a knife in Oxford Street in March 1970 was amazing enough—to reject the idea of reporting the incident to the police was fantastic.

And anyway, he thought suddenly, craning forward in his seat, where, where *were* the police? Not sorting out the incredible snarl of buses, small cars and taxis, hooting on all sides of the road and obeying no known traffic laws. Not stopping a fight between a bus driver and a pedestrian he had almost knocked down on the pavement. Not, above all, interfering to help an elderly woman who had been pounced on by a youth in a side turning. Where were the women's clothes shops—all the shops seemed to be selling bright jackets and fantastic hats for the gangs of young men who hung about on the corners of the streets. And what were these gangs of young people doing? Why weren't they at work? How was it that no-one seemed indignant when their neighbour pushed them, tripped them or made a grab at their handbag? How was it that the physically sensitive British had suddenly taken to coming

out in vast gangs to jostle, attack and embrace? And the noise—how was it that after a hundred years of hushed voices his countrymen had taken to shouting and playing the transistor radios swung from their shoulders at full blast?

Exhausted after a long voyage and a hectic flight from Southampton, John leaned back in the taxi and closed his eyes. He was like a man who comes home from work to find his house lying, a heap of bricks and rubble, in the garden.

Well, he thought. Oxford Street has become a quarter, no doubt. There've always been streets in London where the fantastic flourishes. He leaned forward again sharply as the taxi stopped at the traffic lights. The sharp wind of early spring had caught at a businessman's bowler hat and it had fallen in the gutter beside the cab—with a clang. John watched as the man stooped to pick it up. From the way he lifted it John felt sure it was heavily reinforced with metal. He stiffened. That bowler, the symbol, in a way, of his own career and life—why had the man bought it? Did he fear attack? For a moment John felt a personal threat, felt his own bureaucrat's skull cave under a cosh. He relaxed again, trying to shut out the din and jostle. Probably the man was a jeweller from Bond or Brook Street used to carrying large amounts of valuable jewellery from place to place.

John closed his eyes and kept them closed. A tall, skeletal man of forty-five, he had all the nervous and physical resistance of those Englishmen whose long skulls and paper-thin hands mark them down as neurasthenics or tuberculars until they live actively and enjoyably until the age of ninety remarking as they die, "I thought I felt a bit off-colour this morning". Nevertheless five long years in the capital of one of the sweatiest and most fever-ridden of the former French colonies in West Africa had tired him and the disappointed expectation of some peace and quiet, some drinking in of familiar scenes, made him feel worse.

So he kept his eyes closed until the taxi stopped in Hanover Square. He stared in wonder when the taxi driver asked his price—five times as much as he would have ex-

pected to pay. He paid up and entered the comforting doors of the headquarters of the United Kingdom Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Mission.

Within, he noticed with relief, all seemed the same. The same coming and going of students, academics and the best-that-has-been-thought-and-saiders of five continents, the same thin, hard-pressed women bearing enormous piles of files in and out of the same lifts, the same charming arrangements of flowers in the same charming pots in the dowdy entrance hall, the same bowler-hatted figures coming in the doors, the nice girls in well-pressed woollen dresses hurrying to and fro—none of the frontless dresses which had stirred John to mingled embarrassment and sympathy (it was, after all, only March) in Oxford Street. No, nothing seemed to have changed, and they were only a stone's-throw from what John had privately considered a cesspit.

He got into the lift.

"John," a voice boomed, "Nice to see you back." He turned to see the solid reassuring figure of Alicia Browne, every line on her broad face speaking of proper methods, official channels and the responsible authorities.

"Thank you," he said. "It's nice to *be* back. But, my God, what's happened to Oxford Street?"

Alicia looked somewhat embarrassed—clearly Oxford Street was not part of the image UKESCM wished to propagate. "Yes—that," she said, her voice expressing HMG's regret that anything untoward had occurred, "It's time the situation was tackled properly."

"I should have thought a few policemen enforcing some of the more obvious laws about noise abatement and assault would have been sufficient," John said.

"The force isn't big enough," Alicia said.

John stared, "You mean this is *general*?" he said in astonishment.

"Well, of course. Where were you between the heliport and Marble Arch?"

"Dozing, actually," John said.

"Then you missed a lot," Alicia said. Her voice was not very cordial and John guessed that she was very much upset by the present state of affairs. "You must have

lunch with me—" she began in a more cheerful tone, when the doors of the lift opened, admitting a tall Nigerian, his handsome black head bandaged, his aristocratic nose in plaster and his arm in a sling.

"Hello, Mr Obutu," Alicia boomed. "Been in the wars?"

"I have, Miss Browne," the Nigerian replied with restrained venom. "So much so that I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Six months early? Is that wise?"

"Perhaps not, from the point of view of my studies," Obutu said. "But better a live M.A. than a dead PhD."

"Oh, come come—" she protested weakly.

"I am so sorry. Unlike many of us I bear no personal grudge. But Britain is no place for a coloured man these days. I hope to see you when you are next in Lagos." And with that he went out of the lift.

"What was that about?" John asked when the lift doors had closed again.

Alicia sighed. "The coloured students have been having a rough time recently. Mobs of youngsters have been attacking them—a lot have already gone home and a good many of the others won't go out after nightfall except in groups. Basically of course it's the shortage of jobs and housing and the general feeling in the air. But you can't really blame the less intelligent ones for thinking it's pure colour prejudice. Strictly between ourselves we've been thinking of reducing the numbers coming in for a time. It's the worst advertisement for our society you can imagine—wait, here's my stop."

She put her finger hurriedly on the "Stop" button. "We must have lunch. And, how silly of me to have forgotten, I was so sorry to hear about your wife after I got back from Berlin."

She was gone, embarrassed at having mentioned the subject.

As the lift travelled upwards John's long face was ruminative. Obviously the divorce had caused a stir at UKESCM—one of those stirs the actors are less conscious of than anyone else. He had married Margot in 1947, when they were both still art students. During the time he

had been Director of the UKESCM Visual Arts Department and Margot had been establishing herself as a sculptor he had come home to find a new reflection of Britain's society in his living room every night. There had been the rebel without a cause phase, rapidly followed by the angry young man phase and then Margot's beat phase. Then out went the jeans and in came the smart intellectual, then out with that and in with the respectable but enlightened bourgeoisie. It was in this stage, when the house was in perpetual fog of burnt jam and there was an embroidery needle in every chair that Margot had overreached herself and gone in for fashionable maternity. John had stared down his long nose at the red-handed, red-headed strange fruit lying in its crib at the clinic—and wondered.

"Just like his father," Margot's mother had exclaimed.

A light dawned in John's eyes. "He most certainly is," he exclaimed emphatically, turned, left the room and never saw Margot again.

He applied immediately for transfer to Gallé-gallé. He had been living the life of the civil service intelligentsia for ten or more years and no one but the personnel board thought that he could make a success of it amid the decay, filth and deception of West Africa. But he had borne his spare frame and mild face through the lice and lies with fortitude. So much so that when they could not find a replacement for him he stayed on for a second tour of duty.

And now back to a worse maelstrom, he thought.

"Well, Wetherall," said Henry Plunkett, beaming. "Home at last." He took his hand cordially.

"Yes, indeed," said John.

"Sit down. Sorry about these new chairs. They're economising again, though you'd hardly believe they could cut any closer to the bone. I'm sorry we had to leave you in Negal for so long. What with Jenner's illness at the last moment and then that funny business with the Ministry of the Interior it was impossible to relieve you. When Postings heard about that bad go of fever you got they played hell with me for not trying harder to find you a transfer. I hope you're fully recovered now."

"Oh yes," said John. "Quite better."

"Good trip back?"

"Splendid."

"Come alone?"

"No," John said slowly. "I had a friend with me." He wondered why Plunkett was twiddling his issue biro so hard.

"Ah—nice to have company on the voyage. Was he someone you met in Gallé-gallé?"

"Not really. He's an old school friend in fact. I hadn't seen him since he emigrated to the States after university."

"Ah, yes," said Plunkett. "Well, I daresay you'll be meeting each other while you're on leave."

"I expect so," John said, wondering when the conversation he had come here to have would begin.

"Seeing him soon?" Plunkett asked.

Is he mad? John wondered. Or does he think my psychological state is so bad that I need the immediate company of old friends? What on earth does it matter to him who I meet on leave? "Well, I believe he's gone on holiday," said John staring respectfully at the issue Ceri Richards above Plunkett's head. "But he said he'd see me when he got back. His parents are friends of my father and mother so I'll get news of him."

"I see," Plunkett said. He coughed. "I'm glad you've arranged a pleasant leave—sometimes officers who have been abroad for too long find themselves very lost when they come back. Now—I suppose we'd better get down to examining these accounts of yours."

John pulled the files from his briefcase and the interview returned to a normal pattern.

He refused Plunkett's offer of lunch, saying that he ought to go and see his parents as soon as possible.

"I feel as if I've come back to a foreign country," he added. "It will take me a month to get used to the look and feel of London."

Plunkett sighed. "I seem to have been hearing that from newly returned officers all my life," he said. "The last two or three years have shaken all of us, I can tell you. Still, things will work out, no doubt." But with a sudden loss of optimism he added. "There are days when I can hardly resist the urge to apply for posting to a sordid, peaceful,

bug-ridden spot in the Middle East where I can bring up the family in some kind of style."

"Style?" John said, astonished.

"Lord, yes. I don't suppose you've fully realised it yet but your salary is worth about a tenth of what it was five years ago. There's no money for increasing salaries in the public services at present. The Government is faced with the immense cost of further automation to keep up with the overseas competition and at the same time it's having to pay out vast sums in unemployment benefit for the people thrown out of work by machines. So you, me, the Director General and the sweepers up on the underground are all trying to live on a quarter of what we had even two years ago. Not that it's only us—as you must have seen we're going through a bad patch industrially. Countries which have planned ahead are making us look like a man with a potter's wheel competing with Woolworths. So wages are more or less static. It's an old joke these days to say you're better off on the dole. Many people literally would be."

"Phew," said John. "I thought all this was newspaper talk."

"Just look at the staff's shoes as you leave the building. You wouldn't have seen them on sale at a secondhand shop in Victoria ten years ago. Almost everyone is applying for postings to backward countries simply to find somewhere where their salaries will seem worth earning."

John, sobered once again that day, shook hands. As he reached the door Plunkett said, "Drop in some time next week when you're settled and we'll have a real session on Negal. I hope Pardoe turns up."

John's wits had been dulled by the apparent naïveté of UKESCM. In Gallé-gallé the inhabitants wore expressions of indescribable greed and cunning even when doing each other good turns. In UKESCM they could get the shirt off your back while looking like the Church of England Convocation. So he had the door half open before he realised swung round and closed the door again.

"Plunkett!" he said. "How do you know Pardoe's name? And what is all this about anyway?"

Plunkett sat down wearily. "Oh dear," he said. "What

a stupid mistake. Obviously I wanted to tell you—as you can see there is something going on concerning Pardoe but I'm sworn to secrecy by the powers that be. I never liked the idea of tricking you in the first place." Then he paused and added, "Are you free for a drink tonight?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll meet you about seven in the pub next door."

John agreed and took the stairs down thoughtful and cool. His mind went back to his meeting with Pardoe only ten days before.

And it had been a strange meeting, too.

He had been in bed, drinking his first morning cup of tea, with the bright light of another African dawn filtering through the Venetian blinds and humidity beginning to build up. He heard voices on his veranda and suddenly a man broke into his bedroom, hotly pursued by his servant.

John, a slow, dazed and nasty-tempered riser, did not recognise the intruder and began to summon up the strength to complain.

"Wetherall?" the man said, looking at him uncertainly.

He was unshaven, his face grey in the half light of the room. His hair was long, his tropical suit had been made for a shorter man and had not been changed for several days.

"It's Bob Pardoe, Wetherall," the man said curiously calm for someone in his situation.

"Good God," said John. He had not seen Pardoe since he had left on a mathematics scholarship for the USA. He was astonished to see him at all, and even more staggered he should be in Gallé-gallé.

He pulled himself together. "Sit down," he said. "and have some breakfast. You look as if you need it."

He ordered breakfast.

"Nice to see you again. How did you know I was here?"

"I picked up a copy of one of the papers in a village in Senegal and there was an item about you, with a photograph."

"Sit back and rest. You look exhausted. You don't need a doctor, do you?"

"No. I'm just very tired," said Pardoe. He sat straight on his chair, held up, John guessed, mainly by will power.

"I hate to bother you," Pardoe said, "but I wonder if you can lend me my fare back home?"

"To the USA?" John enquired.

"No—Britain. I don't want to go back to the USA for a time."

John looked at him curiously. "Of course, I'll get you a ticket," he said. "There's a boat leaving the day after tomorrow. I'll be on it myself. Passport O.K.?"

Pardoe shook his head.

"Hm," said John. At that point their breakfast came in and the two sat down at a light table to eat in the steadily mounting heat.

John flicked through the *Times* of the previous day with his usual lack of concentration. UKESCM officers were expected to keep abreast of home news but after ten years in completely alien surroundings British news seemed irrelevant to the point of absurdity. When he heard Pardoe's knife and fork go down he raised his head. He poured more coffee and looked into Pardoe's clear, untroubled, grey eyes.

"I'm sorry to have to ask you," he said, "but you're not in any kind of trouble are you? I wouldn't make an issue of it otherwise, but the situation for the agents of foreign powers is always rather complicated here and I wouldn't want to prejudice UKESCM's work unless I had to."

"I can assure you I've done nothing illegal. Where were you at Christmas last?"

"In hospital with fever—I was down with it for three months. It nearly killed me."

"I see," Pardoe said. "Well—it's a long story which I won't tell you now. But you can be quite sure I'm in the clear all round. I just want to leave Negal and get back to Britain without any excitement."

John thought the whole thing odd but he had known Pardoe since he was a stringy ten year old in horn-rimmed spectacles. He knew he was honest. "Right," he said. "You're welcome to stay here and I can buy your ticket today. But unless you can pull strings about the passport

I can't see you getting away on the next boat. Things move very slowly here."

"Isn't there anyone who can make me up a passport, no questions asked?"

"One? There are hundreds. Forgery is a cottage industry round here." He shrugged. "All right—let's do that."

"Can you get it in a different name?"

John paused, then shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. I think I can get the passport without anyone knowing but if I am detected, as I told you, my organisation is likely to be slung out of Negal lock, stock and barrel. If I can say it was just an impulsive move to cut the bureaucratic corners I might just get away with it. Anything else would be fraud. I'd lose my job, the organisation would be banned from Negal—I can't do it."

"All right," said Pardoe. "Forget it." Exhaustion seemed to hit him suddenly. He moved over to the bed like an old man, lay down and fell instantly asleep.

For the next day and a half John was at his office from dawn until late at night, clearing up the accumulation of five years. All he saw of Pardoe was a sleeping head on his pillow. We will, he said firmly to himself, get to the bottom of all this on the boat home.

But he never did. On the boat Pardoe still slept for most of the day and spent what time he was awake in a deckchair, contemplating the sea with a curiously detached, yet interested, expression. It was as if the element was strange to him. More than that, once John caught him standing at the washbasin, a piece of soap in one hand, running the water down the sink and staring bemusedly at it. John, accustomed to seeing Negaliens when first confronted with a tap, hardly noticed the strangeness of this at the time. Later he thought about it and found it peculiar.

He dismissed Pardoe's remote air and slight oddness of behaviour as the result of some sort of tough experience in Negal. But as the days wore on and Pardoe continued to evade the subject of what had brought him, battered and worn out, to a backward city in West Africa, John became more and more curious. Eventually he gave up his attempts to find out and decided to take Pardoe on

his own terms—very meagre ones, in fact. He appeared to have nothing to say about his past, no plans for the future and no interest in the subject of his parents or old friends. He was polite, friendly and yet there was an invisible barrier round him. It was, John thought, rather like talking to royalty. He was genial but uninvolved on a number of safe subjects—after that he froze you off with perfect politeness. He did not associate with the ship's other passengers. His two favourites were the six and seven year old sons of the captain. While he was up he played with them for hours, making toys out of paper and wood and chatting inconsequentially with them for hours. One evening, at dusk, John came on the little group standing at the rail, staring upwards. Pardoe was pointing towards the stars. "And there," he was saying to the two small boys, "is the big planet, Mars. When you are older you may be able to go up, all through the vastness of space, and make a home there—right out there among all the stars, in the darkness." His voice was calm and steady, but some instinct made John step quickly up to the rail and say, in a parody of the jovial idiot uncle at a children's party. "Astronomy lessons, ey?" Pardoe gazed at him blankly. The two boys melted away, still staring upwards into the heavens.

John felt embarrassed, not knowing why he had had the urge to break up the conversation.

Pardoe said quietly, "Yes. These subjects are too much for such young boys—too much for us as well, perhaps." He bade John goodnight and went back to his cabin.

On a grey, March day they docked at Southampton. Extremely nervous, John saw the best passport Negalien francs could buy go safely through the customs. Then he and Pardoe said goodbye. Pardoe said that he would see him soon. John believed him, for in spite of his odd behaviour he still gave the impression of being the same honest, logical, serious boy John had once known, still seemed to have good reasons for his actions, off-centre as they might seem.

So now, John thought, Plunkett was taking an interest in Pardoe and had as good as told him he was acting under instructions. John was so staggered by his return

to London, after what had been, in a quiet way, a very strange trip home, that he was beginning to be surprised by nothing. He took the train home to his family's house in South London, secretly hoping that there, at least, things would be happening normally.

His father was standing on the steps of the old house as he walked up the street. He was waving and shouting at a departing car and pointing at John. The car swept off and John, terrified that his father's brain had softened during his long absence, hurried along and up the steps. "Hullo, Dad. What's all this?"

"Some colleagues of yours," his father said breathlessly. "Wanted some papers out of your luggage. But you hadn't sent the keys. They seemed quite put out. You know, you'd think they'd have seen me jumping up and down on the steps like a lunatic. I wonder they didn't stop."

"Ah, well, never mind," said John and took his father's arm into the house.

Greeting his mother and exchanging news drove the incident out of John's mind and it was not until after tea that he remembered it. He decided he had better ring up Plunkett and ask whether the papers were urgently needed and which ones they were.

As he explained the situation to Plunkett he gazed absently at his mother, sitting on the overstuffed chintz sofa combing her spaniel and his father who was polishing a lever and eating cake. Outside the french windows the trees swayed.

Plunkett had no idea of which papers were needed but in an unusually brisk manner began to make telephone calls round the building to discover who had sent for them.

Then he spoke to John again. "No one sent those men," he reported. "I can't think who they were. It would be very unusual for you to have any papers so urgently needed that they couldn't wait until tomorrow. Perhaps you'd better meet me here, instead of at the pub, at seven. We'll talk the whole thing over then. In the meanwhile I'd put the files in a safe, if you've got one."

"I'll put them in father's," said John, and rang off.

John's father and mother were looking at him curiously.

"It looks as if those men weren't from UKESCM," John reported. "Goodness knows who they were, though, or why they wanted to get at my files—they're completely unimportant. I can't think of anything I know which is worth illegal entry for."

"Perhaps," said his mother, placidly pulling the spaniel back to her side, "it was what they thought you'd got. There are diamond mines in Negal, aren't there?"

"I suppose it could be that," John said doubtfully. An idea began to creep into his mind.

"It's more likely to be something to do with Bob Pardoe," his father remarked, anticipating him.

"What makes you think that?" John asked.

"Well, he has been a bit of a mystery man. Perhaps they thought he'd given you something—his address for example—and wanted to find it."

"Then why not ask me?"

"Well—he hasn't exactly been seeking publicity, has he? They probably thought you'd cover up for him."

John handed his cup to his mother, who refilled it. He drank, staring at the placid faces opposite him.

"I don't understand," he said at last. "Why should you assume that someone's chasing Pardoe and that he doesn't want to be found?"

"Don't you *know*?" John's mother said in astonishment.

"It looks as if I don't," he said.

"Bob Pardoe," she said, "made a lunar landing just before Christmas. On the return flight the rocket crashed somewhere in Senegal. The papers said Bob was dead. Of course we were astonished to get your letters mentioning him but we thought they must have said he was dead for some reason of their own. Perhaps it was because he disappeared and they couldn't find him." John stared at his mother as she searched the dog's ears for canker. "I can't understand why you didn't know all this yourself," she said.

"I was ill in hospital with fever," he said.

"John! You didn't tell me," she exclaimed, ready to make an argument of it.

"I didn't want to worry you," he said cutting her short.

She sighed. "Why didn't Bob tell you all this?" she

asked. "He must have explained how he came to turn up in Negal."

"That's just it—he didn't," said John. "In fact he was very peculiar on the trip. We hardly talked at all. I thought it was the strain of whatever had happened to him before he turned up in Negal. And in fact he must have had a round trip if he'd come all the way from Senegal. But who on earth can be chasing him?"

"The Americans, I suppose. If he's run off they must want him back, if only for the publicity," Frank Wetherall said. "Still, I doubt if they'd try to get in here on a pretext to search your luggage. It's a real mystery."

"Who did you tell when you got my letters about Pardoe?"

"Only Connie and James Pardoe," Mrs Wetherall said placidly, letting the spaniel drop at last. "Of course they were very relieved although they'd both felt all along that there was more to the story than they had been told—that Bob might not be dead."

"Did they get in touch with the U.S. Embassy?"

"Oh no," she said. "They were far too angry. Imagine it—they'd been told their son was dead and had a lot of official crocodile tears about what he'd done for the world—so they thought either they'd been told a cruel lie or else the scientists had made a stupid mistake. Either way they decided to sit tight and see what Bob did next. We all thought from what you said that he was in hiding—the Pardoe's didn't see why they should hand him over against his wishes."

John's bureaucratic mind was shocked by this casual rejection of authority.

"Good Lord," he said. "You're a cool bunch, I must say."

"It's the world we're in," his father said. "Look about you. London and all the big cities are in chaos. It's each for himself these days. You may not realise it, but your mother can't go out alone after dark, even round here. There are too many thieves about and too many gangs of adolescent muggers."

"If you're going to be in time for your appointment, John, you'd better leave now," said his mother. "You can

see me down the road to the Pardoe's. James will drive me back. I must say I think Bob might have sent a message to his parents before he went off like that."

"As I say, he was in a peculiar mood," John said. "By the way, Dad, I won't put these papers in your safe after all—just in case those men come back."

His father protested but he collected his briefcase from the hall and went off with his mother. On the step his father handed him a key.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll be back well before you go to bed."

"We never open the door after dark," his father told him. "All our friends have got keys to let themselves in with. It's not so much the hold-ups as the teenagers looking for partyhouses. They burst in as soon as you open the door and before you know where you are the gramophone's going, they're eating all the food, getting high on pills and climbing in and out of your beds. They don't usually do any real harm, in fact a lot of them clear up everything before they leave in the morning, but things get broken, and so on——" His voice trailed off. John felt pity for the two of them. They had accepted something like jungle law with remarkable calm, but like the people at UKESCM, occasionally their hearts failed them.

He took the key and showed his mother to the Pardoe's door. Then he caught a bus to UKESCM.

He sat in the front seat, upstairs, brooding. So Bob Pardoe had become an astronaut, had gone to the moon. Then he was only the third man to have done so—Sirosovian, Chukovsky and Pardoe. Looking back, John's strongest memories were of a gangling, clever matter-of-fact boy. The third man on the moon, walking that pitted surface, gazing out at a distorted solar system, looking through space to earth—John could scarcely comprehend it. And why had he left the crashed rocket and wandered through a hundred miles of jungle on his own? And who was so keen to find him that they had tried to get into the Wetheralls' house just to pick up a clue?

John lit a cigarette. The bus had reached Lambeth Bridge. All the other passengers seemed to have got off. Perhaps Plunkett had some of the answers. He stared

across at the Houses of Parliament as the bus crossed the river. The night was quiet. The bus turned left and went past Parliament.

As they swung round into Parliament Square the scene changed. The square with its green turf and statues was floodlit from police vans waiting at the corners of the side streets leading off. Brightly dressed mobs of young people were hanging silently over the railings of the pavements around the square. Nothing seemed to be happening. Suddenly there was a confused murmur as a dozen or so transistor radios went on. The noise increased as everyone turned on their radios and a song which sounded like John to be an adaption of a tribal chant began to thud out.

At the moment a group of six vaulted the railings, ran across the road and began to dance on the floodlit grass. There were three boys, their hair streaming behind them as they span, stamping, round and round on booted feet and three pale-faced girls in long sacklike dresses, also spinning and leaping on the grass with amazing lightness and vigour. They danced in a ring under the pale unfolding leaves of the trees, their tall thin bodies writhing and swinging like puppets.

Suddenly twenty or thirty policemen burst into the square and tried to seize them. They swung away, running and jumping. Immediately the crowds began to swarm across the road to the square, tuning up their transistors as they ran. Soon the policemen were swamped in a mass of jerking, gyrating figures, boys in bright jackets and slim pale-coloured trousers, their hair swinging loose, girls all in the same dun-coloured, ankle-length dresses.

The bus swung hurriedly down a side street as the first policemen came struggling out of the square into the road.

John gazed backwards, smiling at the scene. The noise and clamour and the strangeness of the figures made him think of a carnival.

The conductor of the bus, a short, balding man of about John's age came up and stood beside him, watching the bus's progress.

"Another voyage into the unknown for the good bus number three," he observed as the bus swung through quiet

side streets. "It beats me why they don't reorganise the routes officially, seeing that we have to turn off the proper route every other night. It's pointless running a bus service if we're always travelling a different route, with no bus stops."

"Oh, this happens often?" said John.

"Yes. Sometimes we get as far as Piccadilly Circus or even Oxford Circus—sometimes we get through altogether—but we get this about four times a week on average."

"Is that why the passengers left at the Bridge?"

"You can't blame them. They like to know where they're going and how long it will take to get there."

"Why don't you just push through the crowds?"

"They start hammering on the sides and jumping on and off, arguing with the passengers. It's too risky—supposing they smashed one of the windows and someone got hurt by the glass? Anyway this is a London bus not a stagecoach running through Indian territory. It'd be all right if they'd change the routes to avoid the main centres. If the kids won't alter their ways we ought to alter ours, that's what I think."

"Sounds like it," John observed.

"All they need is jobs, anyway," he went on. "People carry on about anti-social behaviour and that but I know—I've got two of my own. The boy's fourteen and the girl's thirteen. What's going to happen to them? They'll leave school in a couple of years time and go straight on National Assistance. How am I going to keep them at home nights when they've got money in their pockets and they've been doing nothing all day? It can't be done. They're young, they've got a lot of energy, you can't expect them to sit on their backsides all day and all night like a lot of cabbages."

"What about these government youth employment centres? Couldn't they sign on there?"

"Oh, they'll join, just like all the rest. But they won't stick it. The money's only the same as the National Assistance and its human nature at that age to want to get out and roam around, not sit in rows making a lot of useless stuff like baskets and dog collars—they know it could be done better and quicker by machine. They're not stupid.

They know the unions won't let them do useful work in case they put their members out of work, and the government's got to give them something to do to keep them out of mischief. It's like convicts sewing mailsacks. How would you have liked that when you were a lad?"

"I see what you mean," said John.

"It's not right," he went on. "At their age I was on piecework, making small machine parts at a factory in Dalston. It was horrible, but the work, and hating the foreman and the union meetings at dinnertime kept my mind occupied. At least I had something to do, even if it was bloody awful."

"You're right," said John. "But what's the solution?"

"God knows, I don't," he said. "Now they're saying we should send them on missions to help the world's unfortunates but they can't make them go if they don't want to. And the fact is at that age they want excitement and a lot of money, not doling out milk to starving babies. Maybe it isn't right, but that's how it is." He looked out of the window and said, "You'd better get off here—Bayswater Road. Can't get any closer than this. Know your way?"

"Yes, thanks," said John. "Is there anywhere special to avoid?"

"Don't go near Soho. You get the nasty mobs there. And keep off the main roads. Park Lane, Green Street, Grosvenor Square and then across Bond Street is your best route. Good luck."

John got off the completely empty bus and waved as it set off up the Bayswater Road.

After a peaceful walk he arrived at UKESCM, quiet after the day's work. He walked up to Plunkett's room.

Plunkett, surprisingly, poured him a glass of sherry.

John drank, then said, "I brought those papers in with me. I thought you could have a look at them to see if they're really innocuous, and then put them in your safe. I didn't really want to leave them in the house with my parents."

"Quite right," said Plunkett. "Let's have a look at them."

John handed the files over and Plunkett went through them rapidly.

"Just what I thought," he said finally. "Nothing more

explosive than my wife's recipe collection. I hope you left the carbons in Gallé, by the way."

"Of course," said John, hurt. "Any idea about why they wanted to look at them, then? Or of who they were?"

Plunkett sighed. "I've got my own theory," he said, "though they'd shoot me for telling you. In fact I'll tell you all I know, which is too little. I was brought in by the Foreign Office simply because they thought I could pump you about Pardoe's whereabouts without your suspecting anything. I told them it was impossible, but there you are. My contact at the F.O. just told me that the Americans had reason to believe that Pardoe was alive and that someone like him had been reported to be travelling back with you. When they learnt that you had known Pardoe and that your parents were friends they guessed it must really be him. All I was told is that the Americans are trying to get hold of him and so, for some reason, are the Russians. It was one of the two who tried to get at your papers. Obviously neither can work in the open because Pardoe is officially dead."

"I wonder why the Russians want him."

"I'll tell you my theory. You remember the two Russian astronauts, Sirossian and Chukovsky?"

"Yes."

"Well, to begin with we've heard very little of Sirossian recently—after the first photographs there was no publicity of the kind they gave Gagarin and the others. But odder still is what happened to Chukovsky. He was in East Germany at the beginning of a grand European tour. They'd organised a vast meeting at the Brandenburg Gate with massed bands, a march past of troops, a display of weapons—a sort of May Day rally in other words, all designed to be photographed and commented on in the West. When suddenly Chukovsky stops saluting, walks off the platform, through the crowd and, bingo, right through the Gate. Naturally with hundreds of cameras on them they couldn't grab him, and, equally naturally, no one on the other side liked to do anything."

"Where did he go?" John asked.

"Into the crowd. I know it seems incredible, but he vanished."

"Where is he now?" said John.

Plunkett shrugged. "He could," he said slowly, "be absolutely anywhere."

"That's really strange," said John.

"You see," Plunkett continued, "I think its likely both of them are refusing to co-operate—Sirossian quietly, Chukovsky by just doing a bolt. Once the Russians got wind of Pardoe's disappearance their one idea was to get hold of any clue about his state of mind, to see if he was the same as their men."

John considered. "That seems more than likely. What a peculiar business. And you know, I wouldn't be surprised if even the Americans haven't seen Pardoe. He may have got away directly after the crash, without making any report."

"I don't know anything about that," Plunkett said. "I'm just the ninth link in a complicated chain of command—I know less than the man above me and he knows less than the man above him. I've always maintained it was a stupid way to work. Tell me the truth—do you really know where he is?"

"I don't," said John. "If I did I'm not sure if I'd tell you. I daresay I shall be seeing him in due course. He's bound to get in touch with his parents."

"I imagine someone's watching their house," Plunkett remarked. "However, my duty to the State is done. Let's go out for a drink. If you do hear from Pardoe you can tell me or not as you wish. I'm a UKESCM official working for the F.O. which is working for the U.S. government. I can't put any pressure on you at all. As you know I've never approved of mixing UKESCM up with governments, outside the normal run of business. And, like you I imagine, I've got an irrational sympathy with poor old Pardoe, being hunted all over the place—although I suppose he's worth millions in terms of hard cash. If he did get away without making a report you can see why the rocketmen are annoyed."

John felt weary. "Let's go and have that drink," he said. "I only got back today and I'm feeling raddled."

He sipped his whisky with pleasure. Apart from themselves there was only one quiet couple in the bar.

"The back entrance is over there," Plunkett said.

"Oh—why tell me?" John asked.

Plunkett smiled. "The noble savage," he said. "Pointing out the back entrance in pubs is common politeness these days. It's in case of a sudden raid by a gang—particularly necessary around here, because we might get one of the ugly mobs over from Soho if they break through the police cordon."

John gulped down his second drink. Plunkett smiled again. "It's hard to adjust, I know," he said. "Things have changed so rapidly since you left. Old Greene came back from Canada after four years and I've just heard he's had a breakdown. We're seriously contemplating composing a tactful warning letter for officers returning from abroad."

"I was very shocked to hear that my old mother might be mugged on her way down Ferndene Avenue, where she's lived for thirty years," John said. "It can't all be poverty."

"Oh, it's not," said Plunkett. "In fact there is no poverty. Admittedly there are jobs which, by present standards, pay so badly that the worker would be better off on unemployment benefit, but if he's feeling the pinch he can always leave the job and retire to a life of affluent idleness. In my opinion it's the lack of incentives which drives people to crime—they've nothing to interest them, nothing to tire them out, nothing to interest them and nothing to aim for. Think of the average job—you work long hours and are too tired after work to think of crime, you may hope to get promoted, so you've got something to concentrate on—that or earning a bonus, or overtime or something—and you've got friends, or enemies, at work to take up the emotional slack. They proved back in the mid-sixties that one in three men was going to be convicted of an indictable offence before he died. And that was when everyone was employed, but life was getting a bit easier and jobs less responsible than they had been. If you get an unemployed but well-fed population you're bound to get crime."

"That's not what they thought when men were working a sixteen hour day in factories," John objected.

"They didn't envisage an undereducated population.

Most of the country has been bred to work hard at manual jobs, not spend their days working at the loom or improving their minds."

"The conductor on the bus I took said that the government plan for sending people to underdeveloped countries wasn't very successful."

"It's not surprising," Plunkett said. "Not very many people are natural voluntary workers. Most of us want a personal target to aim at, preferably with some sort of material gain attached to achieving it. Anyway, it's only for the young. Not many men with families would willingly uproot them and take them off to a backward country so that they themselves could do social work. Anyway their wives wouldn't let them. They're all queen bees like Margot these days."

"What—bossy?"

"More than that. They're completely in charge now. The men are out of work, so they've got no real role in the home, except for their trips to the Labour Exchange. The women do all the work and make all the decisions. That reminds me—sorry I forgot." He produced an invitation. "Margot wanted me to give you this. She's been ringing up to ask after you occasionally during the past year. Do you want to go?"

"Are you going?"

"I will if you will," said Plunkett. "I doubt if I'll stay, though. You've no objections to seeing her?"

"Not really," said John. "I'm not so sure about that red-headed bastard, though."

"Cameron? Surely he can't still be on the scene?"

"I meant it literally. The tiny tot who fraudulently bears my name."

Plunkett looked at him sympathetically. "I believe he lives with his grannie in Cornwall."

"Thank God," said John and they walked through the quiet streets to Bruton Place. To John the streets seemed deserted.

"Here," he said in alarm. "I bet that bowler of yours is reinforced, Plunkett."

Plunkett smiled modestly.

"No wonder you've got the O.B.E.," John said.

"You should be up for one this Birthday Honours," Plunkett told him.

"If I co-operate over Pardoe, you mean," John said grimly.

"Hm," said Plunkett non-committally.

They walked in through the open doors of Margot's mews house. Even in the narrow hall the shouting and music were deafening. It was not so much a party noise as the sound of a mob at a public hanging, John reflected. He advanced to the door of the party's main room and opened it, intending to step in. He recoiled instead.

The music, decibels above what John would have thought the normal ear could stand, was the Old Hundredth, sung by tough masculine voices to an accompaniment of flute, organ and a complex drum beat. The lights were low, shining on towering black walls stained into tortured shapes. Over the company hung a cloud of almond-sweet marijuana smoke. Below the pall of smoke bodies gyrated, bare-bosomed women and garishly dressed men, whirling and stamping. The epicene teenagers in Parliament Square had looked weirdly light and graceful. Margot's guests, in Margot's dark and smoky room, were ten years older and twenty pounds heavier. Their rolling flesh and vacuous expressions gave the scene an air of aimless depravity. The bawls, shouts, pinchings and clawings reminded John of some obscene nursery filled with overweight tots.

At that moment a couple rushed past John in the doorway. The man, a plumpish figure in red, was in the lead. "No, Penny, leave me alone," he cried and headed out into the street. The woman, sagging bosom bare and hair lank, ran after him, grasping at his coat.

"See," came Plunkett's voice diabolically in his ear. "Saytr pursued by a nymph. What did I tell you? Still going in?"

And there was Margot, pale and half-naked, pushing through the throng with her arms outstretched, screaming, "Johnny!"

John turned without hesitation, and ran, followed by Plunkett. He twisted and turned through the streets. Finally, with one terrified glance behind him, he ducked

into a pub and fell into a seat at the bar. He ordered two whiskies. Plunkett puffed in and fell down beside him.

"I know," he gasped. "Margot is part of a fast set—but there was no need to be so dramatic."

"I thought of that poor fellow in red. I know Margot's strength," John said. "I couldn't face the idea of being dined off."

"They will imitate the teenagers," Plunkett puffed. "And they haven't got the panache."

They got their wind back and drank in silence, until the owner came over to tell them he was putting up the shutters. A gang, he said, was on its way over from Soho. They left and went through dark, deserted streets to Plunkett's car. He dropped John on the other side of the river, and he caught a bus home.

It was about half past eleven. No lights were on in the house. He walked through the hall and put his foot quietly on the bottom stair.

The kitchen door opened at the end of the passage and his mother stood in the dim light.

"Come in here, John," she whispered. "We're all in the kitchen."

He went in. The curtains were drawn and something had been put round the light to keep it dim. Around the kitchen table sat his father, Connie and James Pardoe—and Bob.

"Hullo, Wetherall," he said.

"I thought you were on holiday," John replied.

"I decided to come back. For one thing I had no money."

"Of course not," John said contritely. "I forgot to give you any. Look—I don't know if you know but the Americans, and my boss thinks the Russians too, are after you for information. Two men tried to get in here and search my papers before I arrived."

"So I hear," said Pardoe.

"I thought something like that might happen. That was partly why I decided to come back." His cool, grey eyes were reflective and still.

John sat and waited for him to announce his plans. But plainly he had come in at the end of the argument.

"It's in your hands, Bob," James Pardoe said wearily. "You can't be forced to see anyone unless you want to."

"You need a rest, Bob," his mother said appealingly.

"What are you going to do?" John asked.

Pardoe sat still, looking at nothing.

"It might be better to see the U.S. authorities," James Pardoe suggested. "Then they'd leave you alone."

"I can't see why you won't," his mother said.

"You wouldn't understand," he said. "It isn't really worth bothering with them."

John rallied himself. It was too hard not to fall under his friend's spell. In his presence he felt that these things really did not matter, that it was up to Pardoe to decide on a line of action regardless of other considerations. He became sure that if Pardoe wanted to withdraw he would be able to do so without impediment. Nevertheless the bureaucrat in him made him persist.

"I don't understand," he said. "If you're planning to disappear—why?"

Pardoe gazed at him. "Anything I told them about the moon would add fuel to their flame. Do you think I made a lunar flight to observe the landscape. No. To them the moon is a number of things it isn't any longer to me. It's a lump of matter in space which can be a source of raw materials. It's a place to fire a rocket at parts of the earth. It's a base from which to make forays to other planets, to see whether they can be torn apart for profit, colonised in defiance of other nations, have bases planted in them with rockets aimed at earth. If you had been through the darkness, had set foot on an alien planet, had *seen*—" he broke off.

"You can't hide forever," Connie Pardoe said, near to tears.

They looked at each other.

There was, John thought, no meeting place for them. He was a man who had seen space and time and been moved by them. She was a woman who knew space as the distance she could walk or travel, time as a distance of dark to dark into which certain jobs had to be fitted, or as a journey from winter to winter, or a series of children's

birthdays, every rotation meaning half a head taller, a new winter coat, a new term beginning.

The group sat silently in the kitchen. The shaded light fell on Pardoe's grey face, his pale, blank, remote eyes.

The door bell rang. No one stirred.

It rang again. Wetherall rose and went out, followed by John.

As the bell rang again he knelt down by the letter box and said, "Who is it?"

"We're from the U.S. Embassy. May we speak to Mr. James Pardoe, please."

"Call on him tomorrow. I never open the door at night," called John's father.

"It's urgent. We have a message for him."

Then James Pardoe was at his side. "This is Pardoe," he called. "I've nothing to say to you. Nothing at all."

"It concerns your son, astronaut Bob Pardoe," called the voice. There was a murmured conversation outside the door.

"My son is dead. I have nothing to say to you," Pardoe repeated blankly. He walked away, down the hall into the kitchen. John and his father stared after him. James Pardoe knew, John realised, that in a sense his son was dead.

Wetherall knew it too. He called, in a high, angry voice, "You've taken his son—now leave him in peace." And the two men went back into the kitchen.

The group stood by the stove, staring at each other. "Bob, dear, come home," Connie Pardoe appealed. She thought that sleep, and food and his home would bring Bob back.

He shook his head. "I've got to leave. If they really want to get me they can announce that after all I am alive and that I'm here without a visa. Then they'll be able to arrest and extradite me. Is there anywhere I can hide, John?"

"I know a man who can conceal you," John said. "Then you can make arrangements to leave the country for a while."

Pardoe looked at him, absorbing the fact that John knew he had to escape.

"If you're going you'd better go by the back garden. You can cross the Adams' garden and get out into the railway passage. Then go across the railings into the park and get out on to the main road," John's father said.

The parents watched their sons slip out of the kitchen door into the moonlit garden. As they walked down the path they heard John's mother say, "We'll have some tea. I'll put the kettle on."

They clambered fences and railings and started to walk across the park in the sharp evening air. Pardoe's long, tireless stride made it hard for John to keep up. Soon they were walking down quiet back streets, illuminated by the moon as if it were midday.

"I'm taking you to a Negalian student in Notting Hill—I arranged for him to come and study at L.S.E.," John said. "He can hide you until we've organised your escape from the country." He looked up at the moon and then at his companion loping along beside him. "It's strange," he said, "to think you're one of the only three men to have gone up there."

"Shall I tell you one of the most frightening things about earth," said Pardoe. "It's water. When you've travelled through space the hardest thing to get used to again is water. It seems an alien substance, it seems incredible that there should be vast seas made of it."

"You're the new man," John observed. "We came from the sea to the land—now you've gone from the land into space."

As they walked, their heels echoing on the empty pavements he felt an urge to communicate with Pardoe. At that moment he needed to understand him. Pardoe was a man, an old friend. It seemed wrong that the mere act of spaceflight, which, logically, was only a journey, longer and more complicated than a train trip, but no different in kind, should cut him off from other men. His mind began to work.

"Look, Pardoe," he said. "I realise I'm probably shouting across a gulf at you. I know that the lunar flight has somehow changed you, rather like dying and being re-born, but I think you ought to try and listen to me."

Pardoe was listening.

"You're in an exalted, remote state at present—perhaps it's temporary and could be categorised as a state of shock. Perhaps you've really changed, perhaps all your attitudes and your whole personality has altered for good. But the rest of us are stuck here on the same planet, surrounded by the same influences and although you may not have seen it there are problems here. All over the civilised world people are bored and restless and putting out their surplus mental and physical energy in the wrong directions. Men need something to work for, and they haven't got it. Don't you see the solution? The discovery of the New World led to a tremendous burst of energy, released in every direction, among the races which made the discovery. The discovery of the planets could mean the same—much more. For most people it would mean something to do, and for others the knowledge that something existed outside earth might lead to a cracking of the old narrow views of things—a kind of fresh Renaissance." He gazed at Pardoe. "Can you understand what I mean?" he asked earnestly, like someone questioning a child. "Here on earth today we're underemployed, mentally and physically. We're stagnant, we're thinking to an old pattern. We're bored and tired, like people who haven't enough to do. We're ingrown, we're contentious, we're lazy."

There was silence. Pardoe walked on, but his pace had slowed. John felt triumphant. He rushed on. "You—altered by going through space—are a forerunner. You are what we might become." He paused. Then said, "But now I'm coming back to what your parents, and my parents, and all the civil servants are saying to you. If you're to help, you can't cut yourself off from the machinery."

"That's what you say. But the planets are like the atom. They can be used to help, or destroy. It's not the thing itself, it's the intention with which they are used."

"No, Pardoe," John said. "You're proof that that's not so. A stick or a stone can be used to build or maim, as the user decides. But you've crossed space and you aren't the same man. Surely what happened to you would happen to the others. You've come back as you are—not greedy or warlike. Why shouldn't that be true of everyone else?"

Pardoe trudged on. Then he said. "If only I could be sure of that. But if I co-operate, and the results are as I fear—look what harm I will have done. Supposing we strip and exploit the universe, use it like a battlefield, the way we have used earth. Once I go to the Embassy there will be no turning back—I'll be gambling with the planets."

John sighed. Then his civil servant's talent for seeing the qualification, the parenthesis, in every situation asserted itself. "You aren't the only one involved," he said. "There are the Russian astronauts."

"That's true," said Pardoe. "But I can't do something just because I think I'm not taking the ultimate responsibility for what happens. I've got to act as if my judgment were the only one."

"Anyway," John said truthfully. "The other two—Sir-ossian and Chukovsky—appear to have gone to ground. They may feel like you."

"If that's so," Pardoe said. "Then it gives me hope. You see, if they've been affected like me then everyone else who goes through space may be. In spite of what happens on earth, the men who have gone through space will be of a different kind. But I can do nothing until I know."

John sighed. They had reached deadlock. Pardoe would continue with his plan. Nothing would be changed.

They were walking up the Vauxhall Bridge Road towards Victoria Station. John thought that they would try to get some coffee there and then see if there was transport to take them to Notting Hill. He said this to Pardoe, who did not reply.

They entered the wide area in front of the station. John hurried on, looking for a coffee stall. Pardoe stopped and stared ahead after him. John was nearing a man leaning against a lamp post, his face illuminated by the light. The man was doing nothing. His face was blank and calm. Then Pardoe began to run.

John heard the footsteps behind him and imagined that Pardoe was trying to catch him up. He stopped. Pardoe ran straight past him, up to the man under the lamp post. He stopped, peered at him. The other man stood silent.

Then he began to smile. They grasped hands and smiled into each others' eyes.

"How very glad I am to see you!" Pardoe cried, like a man who has found his lost friend.

"I am more glad than I can say to find you." The other man's voice was deep.

John, standing a few feet away from the two, recognised him. Chukovsky, the man who had made the second lunar landing.

"How do you come to be here?" Pardoe asked, still clasping Chukovsky's hand, as if he were frightened he would leave him.

"I managed to get away after my debriefing." Chukovsky said. "I hear rumours that you were even more fortunate. I thought I might find you in London if I waited long enough." He smiled. "What a lot of money we have cost them."

Both men laughed. Across the road John saw a policeman stop and glance at them. Then, satisfied, he moved off.

"And Sirossian?" asked Pardoe.

Chukovsky said gravely. "Because he was the first man up Sirossian was gone over more thoroughly even than I was. The strain of answering the questions, undergoing the tests, in his new state of mind, seemed to be too much. These days he never speaks. He sits—all day. The Lilliputians poked and prodded their Gulliver, plied him with irrelevant questions which he knew were designed to provide greedy solutions to greedy questions—and he died, in a sense. It was tragic. He's happy, though. I have been to see him and he smiled at me as if we shared some happy secret, and then he went back into his dream. The authorities are desperate to know what has happened to all of us. Sirossian has deserted mentally and you and I, to save our sanity from these frightening little men, have deserted physically."

The two men went on smiling into each others eyes, hands clasped.

"Let's go to the river and talk," Pardoe said. John watched them stroll off. But before they reached the end of the station area a large black car swished past him and

drew up by the two men. Three men leapt out, grasped Chukovsky by the shoulder and began to fire questions at him in Russian.

At the same timed moment a second shiny car drove in from the other end, pulled up sharply and released two more men. John heard American voices raised sharply to Pardoe. The two men stood calmly at the centre of the group, replying quietly.

John himself drew cautiously into the shadows of the station. That strolling policeman, he thought, must have recognised the pair and reported it smartly.

The group remained frozen under the station lights, American and Russian voices raised in argument. In the centre Chukovsky and Pardoe stood easily, casual as two men chatting on a golf course, obviously refusing to move.

John stood dubiously against his wall, peering at the group, wondering if he ought to interfere.

Then silence fell. The big American had worked away from Pardoe and was shaking his head at his colleagues. The Russian group stood to one side, silent and staring at Chukovsky.

Then John heard Pardoe say quietly,

"Since Chukovsky and I do not want to be separated I suggest we all go to the British Foreign Office and sort things out there. To make sure we all *do* go there, I'll travel in the Soviet car and Chukovsky can go with the Americans."

The two groups paused, then the big American shrugged at his colleagues and nodded Chukovsky to his car. They all got in, and the two glossy vehicles drove, side by side, from the station.

John watched them go, still leaning against his wall. Then he began the long quiet walk home feeling the firm asphalt of the pavements beneath his feet and often looking up through the darkness at the stars.

—PIPPIN GRAHAM

XENOPHILIA

by Thom Keyes

The Starboat Robot /E "Lee" jumped into hyperspace.

It hung in that empty place, halfway between the Rim and Sol, gathering energy for the home jump. The Starboat would rest for a week, then hit Terminus, and the passengers would shuttle home.

Twister left his cabin when the whistle blew, joining the other travellers in the corridor. All chattered or smiled expectantly as they walked to the gambling saloon. Hyperspace was free space.

There were crystal chandeliers and silver lamp brackets, some even glowing with gas-light. As the velvet curtains were drawn the outer hull-shielding folded gracefully into the wrought pillars spaced at intervals along the saloon. The inexplicable dawn-rose glow of Free Space warmed the observation rails. There were paintings, priceless old masters. Washington crossing the Delaware, Iwo Jima, September Morn.

A bar reached along the top end of the saloon. It had a big brass footrail and a big brass cuspidor at each end. Behind were rows and rows of bottles backed by a shining glass mirror in a carved wooden frame. The bar itself was wood ; highly polished, solid.

In the middle of the room was the action.

Three roulette tables, a keeno screen, two crap tables, five blackjack layouts. The poker tables were roped off by a thick green silk cord. There was even electronic Bridge for that kind of people. The croupiers, immaculate in brown morning suits, had control in this land. The credit of a punter could be known to them instantly on a private monitor, there could be no bad debts. In fact there could not even be a situation where a player had to sell his shirt, because even in Free Space regulations forbade the house to grant credit on more than forty per cent of an established account. Prospectors who had grown rich in ten years of sweat at the Rim fields stayed a further four gathering money to make or break in the one week of the trip home. The one week of hyperspace before the jump.

It was expensive, the trip. There were tourists of course, a few of them, touring the stars, avoiding death duties, damned if the Government should have their money. There were also a few executives doing very important business with their Rim Mines. They stayed in their cabins poring over documents, planning mergers, that sort of thing. And lots of drink, but in their cabins, not the saloon.

And the prospectors themselves. Twister did not give them more than a passing stare.

There was Rim-Eye who spoke loud and very painfully slow. Nine years over an ore-scanner gave him the rim-eye, and for eight of those solitary years his little tub had a faulty sound-link so that he got echo on every word he spoke over the radio, or just to himself. Ordinary speech became just scramble. That is a hard habit to shake.

They were a crazy lot, the prospectors. If they were on the boat then they had made their pile, and if they were loud-mouthed and bawdy it was because they had paid for it, working their claims, mindless and alone in patchy oversuits.

There was one strike-it-lucky who had been out for six months, hit a deposit and sold out to a big company. The others would not speak to him, he had lost an arm, and they said that he was a claim-jumper.

What Twister was interested in were the non-humans. Weighing them up. The gangling Aglan drinking at the bar already, and sporting a Stetson and Deputy Sheriff's badge. That squat brown dignitary preening his fur, who was a male Encephed from Sigl. There were families from Algol and Avenir and a Telepath with watering green eyes who had been warned off the card games. They were all bad marks. That left Twister fourteen creatures of different races that he had never seen before. He pulled out his note-book and identified them. Certainly not much to go on, this trip. The notes didn't tell him much. He could identify them and sort out the bad marks, but the notes were too scanty to give him much idea for lines of chat, for customs, habits, ideas.

In the end Twister picked on a female sub-tropazoan. She was a Tarpani Encyclador. Twister did prefer females

somehow. His notes on her said only: "Very highly sexed." That was quite enough.

Twister walked across to the men's room to brush off the dandruff, comb his hair. The spidery hand of a Tungolian lavatory-muralist had been at work. And the jokes.

"Kilroy was here." And underneath:

"Don't give him any credit," scrawled in a different script.

Twister straightened his tie and polished his shoes under the machine, then he went back into the Saloon and looked around for the Tarpan. The tables were full, but she was big. She should stand out. Then he saw her settling down beside a roulette table. He moved next to her. "May I take this seat?" he asked, and indicated the empty place. "By all means," she replied. Thank God she spoke Galactic.

He even introduced himself as Twister, in the earth form, of course, and they got on well. Twister was confident in his appearance of naïve sensuousness. He exaggerated it in his quiet conversation. He was smooth and strong. The woman could never recognize what he was; a gigolo, a professional lover. In the simulated evening, after many drinks, he confessed his affection for her. They moved away from the observation rail and walked down the corridors to her cabin. Twister scored on his mark.

And it was love. There was no doubt about that. It was the deep binding love that only a Tarpan Encyclador is capable of. Gladly she gave him money for the gaming tables. Most he kept, some he gambled. If he won he would give some back to her, just enough to show his honesty. If he lost she gave him more. It was turning out to be a profitable journey.

The nights were spent together in her cabin.

"Is this really love?" she had asked him, as he ran his lips over her moist Spinula.

"I have never felt so strong a passion," he murmured in reply.

"When we go," she said, "what then?"

"I will stay with you forever," he cooed.

She nodded softly. "We must never part."

All this was no longer sad or sick to Twister. When he had first started on the Starboats he had given his attention to the home races, and then it was a joke, and a bore, so he moved to aliens, to new races. Now it was just a job, now it was without feeling.

There had been frustration.

When you are satisfying the dirtiest, most revolting, most forbidden desires of another creature, you cannot help but think of your own needs. It may be that the rubbing of a guiltily unclothed bald spot on the back of the neck is an unmentionable perversion, or the frottage of a seed-pod, a black pleasure ; to Twister it was neither sexual nor repellent. But he did have affections.

There was Kitta, the beautiful sixteen-year-old. She, too, worked the Starboat at her old profession. After this trip they had arranged to shuttle to earth and get married. Somewhere in that there was security. Kitta had no aliens. There were prospectors to pay for the smoothness of her skin, and the executives who sought her company. She was very, very high-priced, and still heavily, heavily booked. It was a brilliant partnership.

At the end of that week Twister started to prepare to break with the Tarpan, easily, nicely. So it was that they lay together for the last night in Free Space. The next day the ship would jump and he was to leave this his home and return to earth.

The female lay glistening on the bed in her cabin. Twister stood over, watching lovingly. That look he had mastered.

Dexterously he massaged the cheeks that hung in folds beside her deltoid mouth. The Extenda, those too, he caressed, and the Spinula. She squirmed. Twister undressed and lay down beside her on the bed. Carefully placed his back to the wall for she was three times his weight. He had only to make sure that she did not unintentionally spread out her girth.

"I love you so much it hurts," she said. Twister winced.

"Yes," he said.

It would not be long now. The ship would soon have gathered in enough energy for the home jump. It had a schedule.

She knew what he was thinking. "In a little time," she said, "we will shuttle, you and I."

It was difficult now. Twister paused to think. "Remember," he said, "that I told you that we will never be parted?"

"I remember."

"I meant that."

"Yes," she said. "It is well."

Twister ran his fingers across the scaled flesh.

The Tarpan cried a little. It would be best to break the affair off in the morning. Then he could explain more easily. He would tell her that she would always be with him in his heart, and that their love was perfect and eternal.

"We have customs," said the Tarpan.

"Yes?"

"For those who love. It is a sad thing, but it must end."

She was doing it herself. Twister remained silent. She was breaking it off, saving him the trouble. What a great trip.

"Our love must be eternal," she said, with his own words. She was offering the same explanation as he would have. He smiled with affection for her.

"Forever," he said.

"Forever."

And so Twister started to make love to her in that strange manner to which Tarpan's are accustomed. So that was it. For her it had been a joy-ride. She must have thought that she was seducing him, bribing him, using him. This pretence of love, the lust underneath, that was her style.

Twister reached out to her. She twined about him feverishly, her pores oozing, oily-slippery as she salivated with excitement. Twister set his teeth.

The female shifted her weight. Massive. Twister pushed, alarmed at the crushing, felt her body fold around him, scales clattering.

The roof of her mouth showed red. The teeth clacked feverishly. "My eternal love," she whispered as she bit into his crushed body.

—THOM KEYES

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